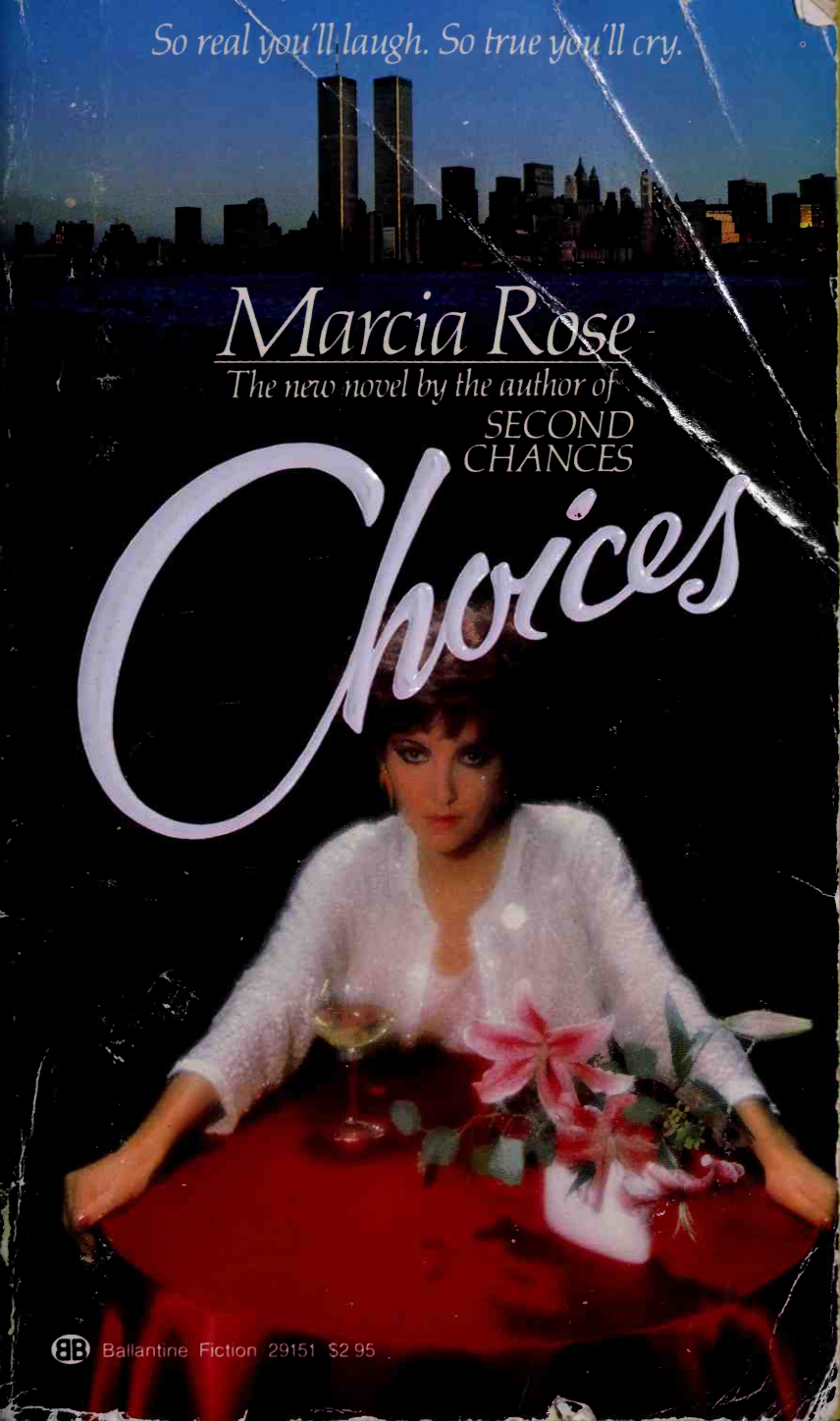
So real you'll laugh. So true you'll cry.

Marcia Rose

The new novel by the author of
SECOND CHANCES

Choices



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Harvard

Natalie Simon

Tough, petite, she's determined to be the next VP at M & M—and to keep up her longtime affair with her buddy Jake Miller . . .

Jerry Webber

Natalie's husband was her first boss at M & M. Now retired, he's a writer trying to maintain a normal home life for their daughter . . .

Barbara Valentine

A wife and mother, she spent years renovating a Brooklyn brownstone under her husband's direction. Now, working at M & M, she's discovering exciting, scary new things about herself . . .

Mark Valentine

A gorgeous, high-powered architect, he calls his wife "Barbie-doll." He hates her new independence *and* her friend Natalie—or so he thinks . . .

Martha J Jones

Once poor, an elegant black woman on the way up at M & M. Her boyfriend wants to marry her, but first she needs to sow some wild oats . . .

Jake Miller

M & M's utterly charming copy chief, who's pure dynamite in bed. Natalie, Barbara, and Martha J all take from him exactly what they need . . .

Also by Marcia Rose
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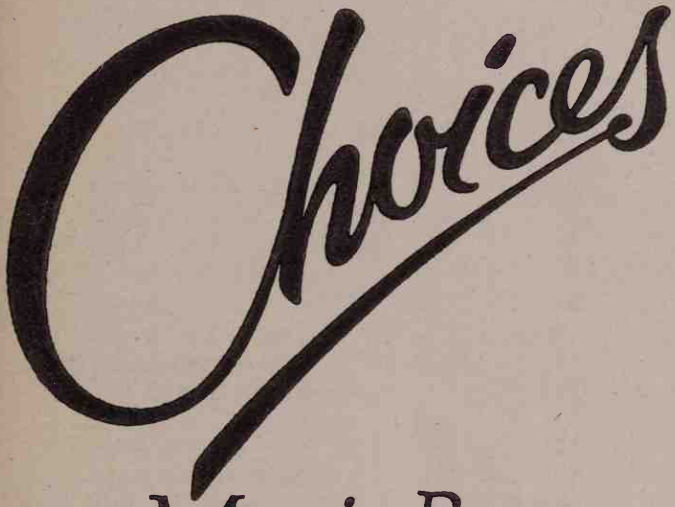
SECOND CHANCES



Marcia Rose

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1 Plucky Natalie Simon

It had all the makings of a perfect day. Brilliant and clear as only a September day can be. No haze hanging in the air. Bright sunshine, bright blue sky. New York, New York . . . sunlight glinted gold over the buildings and in the distance onto the layers of windows in the skyscrapers in which blue sky was reflected in little squares, like so many pieces of velvet to be quilted.

Six-thirty A.M. on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Cool, quiet, no street noises yet . . . only the occasional hiss of tires back on Columbus Avenue. West 94th Street seemed fast asleep still. Only the runners were out.

Heading down the middle of the roadway straight for the park, Natalie Simon breathed in deeply as she trotted along. What a hot summer it had been. And even a couple of days ago, the early morning air had still held the remains of soggy heat. It had been like inhaling steam. But today, cool! She went rather slowly—she always started slow—admired the green and gold vista of Central Park at the end of the block and said, "Shit!" Her legs hurt, they hurt like hell. Every step sent a pain like the edge of a knife right up her shins. On a gorgeous morning like this! It should have been perfect! Her long Sunday run yesterday had been marvelous, and she had looked forward to this morning. And here she was, struggling along hardly able to lift her leaden legs . . . just as if she were a beginner.

Look, she told herself, just turn around and go back. You don't *have* to run. But it was a lie. She had to. Run-

ning was programmed into her day. Well, in a high-pressure job like hers, some kind of physical activity was a necessity; and who had time to run out at lunch every day? She had to. She had missed only five days during the entire last year . . . after that big snowfall. Once you let down your standards, they could just keep on slipping. A day here, a day there, if you felt tired or it looked like rain, and pretty soon you'd be missing more days than you ran. No, it was much better, once you had set yourself a course, to keep to it.

It was easier in the park. Running on the dirt path around the reservoir seemed to ease the pain in her legs a little bit. Of course, it was always better in the park. It was another world in there, under the thick trees, dappled, hushed, private . . . everything in soft focus, gentle, calm, and fresh-smelling. A mile and a half around the reservoir: that was good enough when your legs hurt. She'd think about the new account they were pitching. Good Old Nature Boy health foods. She'd let her mind float free and come up with ten great slogans for Nature Boy by the time she was on the East Side.

But her mind would not float this morning. It kept homing in on her legs. Goddam, they *hurt*. Shit. She'd thought she was all finished with this ache-and-pain routine. She'd been running long enough, and what *other* woman went out 360 days a year . . . through rain and fog and sleet and slush and heat and wind and mud and . . . God, everyone was passing her this morning. *Their* legs didn't hurt. That black guy with the body like her favorite fantasy, all polished brown muscles rippling as he zipped along, hurtled by at what seemed to be the speed of light. She knew him, she saw him every morning. He'd pass her several times. He always did, her bronze Adonis. And here came the tugboat, huffing and puffing like always. He was a funny-looking little man, with milk-white skin and an odd, girlish, mincing step. To look at him, you'd think he couldn't put one foot in front of the other without tripping, but with those mincing little steps he zoomed right by her and was soon out of sight.

She heard Ellie and Fran long before they came close. They would pass, one on either side, laughing and joking

ostentatiously. They were always doing a routine when they ran. The three of them had started this whole jogging thing together—actually, the idea had been hers, Natalie Simon's, on the occasion of her thirty-ninth birthday. It seemed to Natalie that, back then, there hadn't been so much girlish chortling . . . so many witticisms flung across the path, in just the right tone so that nobody within earshot could miss it. Of course, back then, they were all out of breath after the first three minutes. But all that was changed, now. Nowadays, Ellie and Fran were gung-ho marathon aspirants, all outfitted with stop watches and Gore-tex rain suits at over $100 a shot, and the new shoes with the soles made out of air bubbles or nuclear explosions . . . whatever damn thing was In!

She didn't run with them any more . . . hadn't since the Saturday morning, about a year ago, when the two of them had managed to stay just about three steps ahead of her all the way around the bridle path. She remembered it very well, thank you. She had pushed herself, but everytime she caught up, they'd speed up just enough to leave her a teeny bit behind. They kept calling over their shoulders, "Come *on*, Nat!" She tried and then, her eyes stinging with tears of anger, she'd stopped trying, allowing herself to drop way back, forcing them to stop and wait for her.

And then Ellie Bernstein had the nerve, the utter gall, to act *surprised* when she announced she'd go out by herself. "Look, Ellie," she'd said, forcing a light tone and a light smile, "I'm not interested in marathons, and I don't want to go faster. So you two just go ahead and do your thing." She didn't know whether to laugh or kill when Ellie insisted, "But we're the three musketeers," adding, "You've never been a *quitter*, Nat." The whole thing was ridiculously competitive and compulsive. She got more than enough of that kind of competitive and compulsive stuff at work; she didn't need more of it during her recreation time.

And here they came, right behind her, sprinkling gay laughter like confetti—on a morning when she was both halt and lame. Just what she needed!

They charged by. "Ten calories a minute!" Fran caroled. "Keep thinking, Nat: ten calories a minute!"

"You think about that, and I'll think about strawberry shortcake!" she countered, but she was shouting at their backs, swiftly disappearing around the bend. Ellie flipped her a little wave and then they were gone, both round bottoms jiggling ever so daintily as they rounded the corner. Well, at least my rear end doesn't wobble. When people pass *me* by, they see a neat little tushie.

Natalie stuck out her tongue. She didn't have to count calories, never had. She had been born small and trim, and that's how she still was. No excess anywhere. Without thinking, she patted her flat belly. Nothing extra. Agh, to hell with Fran!

It took an awfully long time, but at last she had come full circle. She'd done it. She could go home now. This was the best part of it anyway: the feeling of gathered strength and power you got from the pounding of your heart and the heat pulsing through your body. She slowed to a walk and allowed herself a glow of accomplishment. She reminded herself—as she invariably did, walking west on 94th Street at the end of her run—that just three years ago she had been sedentary, tired, and creaky. Just three years ago she couldn't have run from one lamp post to another without puffing and panting. And now . . . !

As she mounted the wide stone steps, reaching into her waistband for the secret pocket holding her key, her mind began to click, organizing the day.

I Priority Items

A. The damn annual report, the pain-in-the-tushie annual report

1. do with Debbie
2. put off if possible

B. The Egg Account

1. light a fire under Jeff; give small lecture to both copywriters about keeping up with schedules.
2. make sure client feels good about new campaign.

C. Creative Cohorts . . . Oh Lord, she'd have to really get after them. If they didn't find a food assistant for Millard soon, he was going to have a temper tantrum all over her office. He was a good administrator and an imaginative cook, but he could be a royal pain. He had been known to fall to his knees, wring his hands, call loudly

upon the whole pantheon of Greek and Roman gods and sometimes even weep real tears. No, she didn't think she was ready to face a Millard production today—not with another of Peter Marcus's dumb brainstorms scheduled for the afternoon. Facing another session of positive thinking was about all she could handle in one day. And Peter was always so insistent that everyone follow the "Rules of Brainstorming." When they first began, he used a buzzer, loud and obnoxious, pushing at it with delight whenever anyone made a mistake and voiced a negative thought. Brainstorms were supposed to engender pure ideas, unsullied by realism. If someone said, "Let's send a case of Ali Baba bread to the White House" or "Let's make the world's largest omelette on the steps of City Hall" you weren't allowed to say it wouldn't work. You weren't even allowed to smirk. One day, in a little snit, Peter had insisted, "One idea is as good as another. There's no such thing as a bad idea. It's pure elitism to make judgmental comments." And when Nat and Jake and a few other group heads had all groaned in unison, he had backtracked, saying, "Well, in a brainstorm session, anyway." It was Jake who had finally objected to that buzzer. "It makes me think negatively," he said solemnly. Peter had responded immediately, and the buzzer was banned. But now, he interjected *"buzz-buzz"* whenever anyone even hinted at opposition to some far-out notion.

Natalie sighed. Whenever she thought about her job, she ultimately ended up thinking about Peter Marcus. He was a dear, charming man, but just the wee-ist bit eccentric. Of course, advertising was an eccentric business, wasn't it? Was there a single, solitary solid citizen in all of Marcus & Morrisey, Inc.? She doubted it. Just because Peter fired her once a month on Friday and hired her back each time in the wee small hours of Saturday morning, was that any reason to worry? Hell, no, all in a day's work when you're an executive woman in that crazy, wonderful world called the ad game. "Game!" she snorted. "Ha!"

At that moment, one of the building's two erratic elevators suddenly appeared, its doors slamming open and there, facing her, was Elaine Lee.

"My Lord! Elaine."

"My Lord! Natalie! Well, don't just stand there staring at how fat I am these days, come on in. There's room for a skinny lady like you."

Natalie hurried in. "Oh, Elaine, don't be silly!" But it was true. Elaine had long ago gone beyond plump into blobby; and under the tent dress you couldn't discern a recognizable human shape.

Natalie eyed Elaine covertly. That had been one of her few regrets at leaving the housewife role: that she would miss Elaine! And now, she could not for the life of her remember what it was they used to talk about. Laundry? Babies?

They had become pregnant at the same time. And here was Elaine now, a middle-aged woman with graying hair, no style, no figure, engrossed in her laundry. She was—yes, she actually was!—singing the praises of a particular detergent. CLEAN-R. "It really does make everything brighter," Elaine was saying with a defensive laugh. Good, Natalie thought, it's one of our products. I'll have to send a memo to Marian. Marian Rutledge, the copy chief who handled all the other so-called "women's" accounts and whom she couldn't stand, was militantly middle-class, with her Peter-Pan collars and her neat little pumps and her neat little white gloves and her neat little suits. She looked straight out of Wellesley '53 and in fact, probably was. There was nothing wrong with Marian's brains, but Natalie just couldn't take her. So, she wouldn't call her or drift over; she'd write a memo. Section IV Miscellaneous, subhead A., 4. Tell Rutledge her soap powder's really okay with the proles.

The elevator ground to a laborious halt. Sixteenth floor. Natalie scooted out, saying, "Call me." She knew Elaine never would.

She turned the key in the lock and let herself in quietly. Nobody else was up this early. In the morning silence, the hallway amplified the rubber thud of her shoes. From this high up, you couldn't hear the street sounds either. She could be anywhere, anywhere at all.

She'd make a bet that Jerry was hogging the whole bed—he always moved over the instant she got up—flat on

his back, spread-eagle, head thrown back, snoring like the Atchison-Topeka and the Santa Fe. He wouldn't be up until long after she had left the house. She went into the kitchen to pour herself a cup of coffee from the pot she had prepared and plugged in at 5:30 this morning, as she did every morning. And she thought briefly, as she did every morning, how nice it would be to wake up one day and find that someone else had already done it. Hell, when Jerry was still working for the agency and she was home with the baby, she always got up early especially to make his breakfast! No matter how often she'd been up the night before with Melissa. He expected it, goddam it. And she like an idiot, dammit, went along with it. That was when she was playing Super Wife, of course. So why couldn't he play Super Husband? Why couldn't any of them?

Oh hell, let him sleep. It was really nice to be the only one up in the big, quiet, echoing apartment, to stand by one of the windows sipping at her coffee and to look out high over the city. No telephones ringing, nobody demanding her attention. Once she got to the office, she'd have to lock the door and barricade it if she wanted a minute of privacy. Not that she would, of course; her door was always open. She had found long ago that everyone worked better if they could touch base anytime they needed to. She had learned that from Jerry.

She sipped at her coffee and saw him again in memory, before he was her husband, when he was her beloved boss. Group head of all the automotive and other macho accounts. J. C. Weber, that's what it said on the door. He had interviewed her. She was dying to get out of writing tacky catalog copy and into the glamour of Madison Avenue. She had been so hopped up that day, job-hunting in her brand-new pants suit from Bloomie's. She felt as if electric charges were shooting right out from her, like in the comic books. The agency said that M & M was looking for another woman copywriter ("They only have one.") and that's all she needed. "That's me," she said to the personnel guy, "Let me at 'em!" And marched into Jerry Weber's office like gangbusters, only to be completely disarmed by a calm smile of unsurpassing sweetness.

He was a big, burly man who moved quietly and then only when he absolutely had to. The first thing you registered, after the smile, was the leonine head of thick gray hair and the big aromatic pipe that surrounded his head with swirls of smoke. "You must be Miss Simon," he said in his slow bass voice. "Well, well . . . You're looking fine. Come in. Sit down and tell me about yourself."

Mesmerized, she had. All the strong selling points, all the clever witticisms were forgotten as they chatted about business and writing copy and life. Thirty times while she sat there, his copywriters came to the open door. "Jerry, could you just . . ." and "Jerry, I only need . . ." No amount of disruption disturbed his even temper, no problem was big enough to erase his constant smile. There was something warm and intimate about that smile, something that made her feel befriended, made her feel instantly at home.

She remembered sitting there in his dusky paneled office, staring at him, only half hearing what he said, willing him to hire her. Suddenly it became very important that she work here, here with this man, be a part of his group and get to see him every day, to look at his crinkly eyes and his big, strong hands. She supposed that was when she fell in love with him. It was probably why she married him, at any rate.

She sipped at her coffee and made a face. It had become cold and bitter. She looked at the street below. Her window on the world, her little slice of the apple. There were two large garbage trucks, wheezing and moaning as they chewed up their load of trash. Mr. Woo was unlocking the laundry, and a big Foodtown trailer was being deftly maneuvered backward into a tiny parking space. Few pedestrians as yet, but there was Linda the dog-walker and several elderly women wrapped in winter coats were taking their A.M. constitutional. The little old ladies were always in their winter coats, whatever the season, even in the heat of summer. But what she really treasured about her sixteenth floor windows was the misty, distant view of the George Washington Bridge, so many city blocks uptown, it looked the size of a toy. The G.W.B., steel cobweb arching

between two towers. She was especially fond of it because it always brought to mind the cover of a social studies book she had had one year in elementary school. Silver on a dark blue cover: the G.W.B. and above it, in teeny detail, one helicopter, one airplane, one dirigible . . . beneath it, on the silver waves of the Hudson River, one sailboat and one steamship. And on a silver road leading to it, one truck, one automobile; and next to the silver road, one train, belching silver smoke. She always hoped that, one day, when she looked at the bridge, or approached it in the car on her way to the discount stores in Jersey, she would see just that picture. One of everything, so tidy, so symbolic, so controllable. So unlike anything in real life. Real life just took off on its own steam and carried you along. The trick was to make sure you steered yourself to where you wanted to go. She laughed at herself. Right now, she'd just better steer herself to her shower.

At that moment, the bright yellow Montessori School bus came down 94th Street. Even from the sixteenth floor, you could clearly read the legend: Little Flower Montessori School. *Buongiorno fiorello*, it must be 7:15. She checked and it was. The Montessori bus never came late, not even in a rainstorm. Talk about efficiency! Maybe she should have a chat with the driver. Ask *him* for 10 terrific slogans for Nature Boy health food. Oh stop, she chided herself. You'll come up with something great. You always do.

Yes, but she hadn't always been on the verge of 41. Her birthday was just two weeks away. She didn't really want to think about it. In fact, she really didn't want to celebrate it. What was to celebrate? Was it Greta Garbo who said any woman who celebrated a birthday after 40 was out of her mind? Except for Melissa, she would ignore the whole thing. But kids didn't understand. They thought birthdays were the most important, wonderful thing that could happen to a person. So, on her birthday, she'd have to get a cake at the bakery and stick a candle in it and let Melissa sing Happy Birthday. But she'd already laid down the law to Jerry. No more birthdays, forget it, finito, forever, amen.

He had argued with her a little bit . . . "You'll miss it,"

he had warned, laughing. "And this was the year I was going to go to Tiffany's main floor . . . !"

"I *mean* it, Jerry." And he had thrown up his hands, saying: "It's your birthday."

You're damn right, she thought, scrubbing her legs with a loofa under the steaming needles of water. My birthday, and if I want to forget it, I can.

She finished and stepped out, toweling the water from her short-cropped hair. Then she wiped the steam from the mirror and looked thoughtfully at her reflection. How old do I look? It was a game she played more and more often these days. If I were a stranger and saw me for the first time, how old would I think I was?

It was an unusual face. As a young teenager, she had hated it. Then, she had wanted to look just like everyone else. She had wanted to have regular, pleasant, unremarkable features, instead of what she had. Her face was long and oval, framed with very curly, very black hair. Her skin was olive and under her straight black brows, her eyes were gray—large and prominent. Her lips were full and rather pouty and her nose . . . Here she made a face at herself. No two ways about it, Natalie Simon had a beak!

She no longer hated the way she looked. As soon as she got out of small-town Hampton and into New York, she realized very quickly that she was considered exotic-looking—pretty, even. Men went for her. Now, her looks were no longer the point. Her age was. No lines had appeared—*yet*. Would anyone say 25? No, no, of course not. But why not? What was different about her face now from the face of the 25-year-old Natalie? She stared at herself as if at a total stranger. There had been a hollowing-out under the cheekbones, under the eyes—a loss of flesh. A sign of aging? For sure. But it made her eyes—always her best feature—even more noticeable.

Jerry used to say, "A man could get lost in those eyes." No, wait a minute, not Jerry. Was it Jake? Or maybe Ted . . . She turned away from the mirror. Why was she wasting so much time in the past this morning? What she needed was to use these quiet moments to concentrate on the health food pitch. But nothing would come to her. Her

mind was a perfect blank this morning. Marcus & Morrisey was only one of half a dozen agencies trying for the 3 million dollars in billing. If they wanted to grow, they had to add at least a million a year—or so Peter Marcus said.

You had to listen to what Peter said because, first of all, he was the boss. But besides that, he was dynamic and brilliant and creative. Almost single-handedly, the year after his father died, he had brought M & M out of a dangerous slump. But he was group-happy. His one summer on an Israeli kibbutz had sold him on the idea of group living and group thinking. Everyone at M & M was supposed to be part of a big happy family, and he was especially fond of the large, noisy brainstorming sessions where everyone was expected to come up with idea after idea for hour after hour. The one scheduled for 3:00 this afternoon was on the cigarette account, and it made her tired just to think about it. A lot of good stuff had come out of those mental free-for-alls, but it took so *long*. And she had a calendarfull of icky-picky chores to get done today.

Her makeup done, she left the bathroom and dressed swiftly in the darkened bedroom, pausing only long enough to push at her husband's shoulder. "You're snoring, Jer." He groaned in his sleep and heaved himself onto his side, pulling the covers up over his head and muttering. Why did his sleep irritate her so?

Now for Melissa. She hurried down the hall and poked her head into her daughter's room, which was its usual wall-to-wall disaster area. The sign on the door said "IT'S MY MESS AND I LOVE IT." Nat tried very hard not to make a big thing about Melissa's sloppiness; but she couldn't help it, it irritated the hell out of her. She was almost compulsively neat herself—and so she kicked at the roller skates that lay directly in front of the door and sent them clattering halfway across the room. The heap of tangled sheets-stuffed animals-quilt on the bed stirred slightly.

"Melissa! Time to get up, honey!"

The pile on the bed groaned and a muffled voice slurred, "Inna minnit."

"Melissa, really. Don't go back to sleep."

"I'm *up*. I'm *up*. Go away and I'll get out of bed."

Natalie backed away, smiling to herself. The little girl who, a few weeks ago, ran around stark naked without a thought had suddenly become self-conscious, a budding adolescent with delusions of modesty. She had taken to turning her back when she got undressed. It made Nat smile. Didn't she realize that Natalie was her mother and had seen her since birth?

She knew she was expected to feel all weepy and wistful that her baby was growing up. At the last school Parent's Association meeting, Kate, the mother of Melissa's best friend, had waxed all poetic and sentimental about puberty. "Doesn't it make you sad, Nat?" she had asked. "No one to take care of anymore." Kate's eyes had been wet, and Natalie had had to turn away because she felt it so amusing and she didn't want Kate to see her smile. But her answer was no. No, it didn't make her sad, not one bit. She was overjoyed.

She had served her time—she had spent two years at home being Mrs. "Melissa's Mommy"—and it had nearly been the end of her. She hated it. She was bored and restless and beset with the nervous feeling that she was supposed to be somewhere else, doing something real. Of course, she had asked for it. She had imagined some sort of soft, shining motherhood—something like an ad for Johnson's baby powder. The out-of-focus Mommy with her scrubbed face and clean hair and the round, freshly bathed, sweet-smelling baby, cooing at each other, wreathed in smiles, and at the end of the day, joined by a big, gentle Daddy who took his turn playing with the baby.

The reality had been not enough sleep, ever, and constant cleaning. The reality had been endless hours with no one for company but an infant who mostly cried. The reality had been, finally, the feeling that her brain was turning to Jell-O. Now she really was able to enjoy her daughter, now that Melissa had ideas of her own, now that she had a sense of self.

Enveloped in an oversized plastic-coated apron someone had given Jerry—a red monstrosity emblazoned with white letters saying "Head Honcho of the Bar-B-Q"—she care-

fully, lovingly set the breakfast table for one. She poured out cold orange juice, mixed cinnamon sugar to sprinkle on the French toast. Three strips of bacon onto the griddle —Melissa loved bacon. One egg beaten, two slices of bread, onto the griddle, spluttering and steaming. There! A bar of sunlight slanted in the kitchen window and Natalie grinned with pleasure. Breakfast for a Beloved Child made by her Loving Mother. What a picture! The Snoopy mug, the bright red napkin, the bar of light turning the teak tabletop golden, the plant hanging in the window casting shifting leafy shadows. You could sell bacon with this picture. You could sell bread.

You could sell pita bread, she thought triumphantly. Ali Baba Bread, her oldest, her favorite client. She was always dreaming up scenes for them, showing pita bread at the party, pita bread at the banquet, pita bread at the dinner, pita bread with cocktails. It was the fun, low-calorie bread ("FORTY THIEVES TOOK THE CALORIES BUT THEY COULDN'T STEAL THE FLAVOR") for swinging singles. Ali Baba with champagne. Ali Baba with Bloody Marys. But what about Ali Baba with OJ? With hot chocolate? What about the families of greater New York and nearby Connecticut and New Jersey? What about Long Island and Staten Island? Why concentrate solely on singles, who were notoriously fickle in their fads and tastes, when there was a big untapped market of cozy, comfortable bread-eating *families*?

Good idea, Nat. Better make a note of it. She'd put a call in this afternoon to one of the Hasahnis. *Someone* was bound to be in the office, although they were all given to wandering in and out of the bakery, leaving the phone to be answered by Allah. Who should she talk to? Paul? but he hated change. Afifi was smart but went along with Paul, and neither Abdul nor Roland liked to make decisions. That left Amin, and he tended to be scatterbrained. What a bunch! Still, they were doing something right. They had taken the small family bakery on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn and had rapidly turned it into a large-scale commercial business. And they weren't dumb: as soon as they saw that pita bread could sell outside of the Arab market,

they came straight to M & M. Peter Marcus, of course, just loved them. All those brothers and cousins, all linked by blood, all working together. It was right up his alley. Well, Peter was an only child, and like most only children he worshiped togetherness. He hated being alone, even for a minute. That's why he was always all over the agency, poking his head in here, having a word there, and holding meetings whenever he could.

Suddenly it struck her. Melissa! Melissa was an only child, too. Funny, she'd never thought of it quite that way before. An Only Child. Did Melissa mind? She never pleaded for a sibling. Was she missing something? Did she feel deprived? She must remember to ask.

"Morning!"

"Hi, honey." She watched fondly as Melissa slid into her place. She was wearing the same pair of olive drab army pants for the third day in a row. Natalie sighed inwardly. No use saying anything about it, she knew that. "I made all your favorites, Missy." She gazed fondly at her daughter. Melissa was changing almost daily. She was a small, neatly built and athletic child—thank God, she didn't have Jerry's build, he put weight on so easily—who looked like Natalie's mother, with her round face and round cheeks and round eyes and ringlets of inky black hair. Her coloring was vivid; even her lips were naturally red and her cheeks a dusky rose. She would be a very handsome woman—and already there was the hint of something oddly exotic about her.

"Yuck!" said Melissa.

So much for exotic! "What's yuck now?"

"Bacon," Melissa sneered, poking at it with her finger as if it were tainted.

"You love bacon! I made it on purpose just for you!"

"It comes from an animal that was once alive and somebody loved it. Yuck!"

Natalie sighed loudly. "What are you trying to tell me, Melissa?"

"I'm a vegetarian."

"Oh, really? I noticed you took three, count em, three lamb chops last night."

"Well, after dinner, I began thinking about those poor little lambs."

"Okay, honey. We'll discuss your vegetarianism some other time. Right now, it's getting late. Corey'll be downstairs waiting for you, in about twenty minutes. So leave the bacon and eat your French toast."

"Egg," Melissa countered.

"What's wrong with *eggs*, for God's sake? They pay for all your Gloria Vanderbilts."

"They come from chickens. They were supposed to be baby chicks."

Natalie clenched her fists tightly and told herself not to yell. This was their one private time together; let's not spoil it.

"Okay." Patiently. "Just drink your juice. Nobody ever had a pet orange—that I know of."

"Then I'll be *hungry*."

"Okay then, Melissa. Since you're a vegetarian, think like one. Take a veggie. Take a carrot, take a tomato, take a lettuce. But stop *whining*!"

"I *knew* you'd get hyper when I told you I was a vegetarian."

"Melissa darling," Natalie said very calmly. "I am not hyper. I am not even vaguely agitated. I am simply trying to stay on schedule. As you perfectly well know. If you don't want your lovely breakfast, leave it and Audrey will throw it out. But I don't have time to diddle with a vegetarian breakfast menu right now, okay?"

"You're always so grouchy lately!"

"That's not true and you know it. If you turned vegetarian last night, it was up to you to let me know before breakfast."

Melissa heaved herself up from the table with an air of world-weariness. She was obviously doomed to be misunderstood. Nevertheless, she took a stalk of celery from the refrigerator and, chomping noisily, held out her hand and said: "Money."

"What do you mean: money?"

"The school lunch . . ." The words were barely intelligible. "Meat in it."

"Oh Lord. All right, today, because I don't have time to go into this. . . . Bring me my bag. It's in the foyer, the brown leather."

Vegetarian! Natalie thought. What next? She knew better than to make an issue of this. Last month, it had been horoscopes and astrology. She had spent two hours digging through the files in the office for Melissa's birth certificate. That is, Debbie spent the hours. She smiled to herself, remembering their frustration. It wasn't under "W" for Weber, or even "S" for Simon; it wasn't under "M" for Melissa, "F" for Family, "B" for Baby or Birthday or Boss. It wasn't even under "N" for Natalie. What made it worse was that Lois, her old secretary, long gone to live in a commune in Colorado, had done the filing. And Lois had been a genuine flake, who wouldn't do a thing if the office karma were not perfect that day and would retire into the ladies' room from time to time to say "Om" two or three thousand times.

But, finally, Debbie had found it. "Lemme see if I can think like a hippie," she said and began flipping through "I" for Important and "D" for Don't Lose . . . and "K" for Kid . . . and that's where it was. "What do you want it for?" asked the triumphant Debbie. "Passport or something?" "No," Natalie had said wryly, "just look at it and tell me what time she was born." Debbie, amazed, had asked, "You don't remember?" "I was a bit too busy to look at my watch, Debbie. Besides, it's for a horoscope, so we need the exact minute." It was 6:37 A.M. "And now, Debbie . . . are you ready for this? Call Columbia Presbyterian and see if someone—try Public Relations—can tell you the longitude and latitude of the hospital." Debbie had stared. "It's on 168th Street on the West Side."

Natalie had laughed and laughed, trying to apologize to the bewildered girl. "Yes, Debbie," she had finally managed. "I know where it is. But, Deb, we're not talking directions, we're talking *horoscopes*. It's a whole nother world."

And how long had that lasted? Three days? Four? Who knew what she would find this evening when she got home. A chocolate chip and wheat-germ diet, maybe. A new lan-

guage. Well, dinner was Audrey's department; she'd just scribble a note, warning her that they might need three veggies tonight.

She and Melissa went down in the elevator together. The car creaked to the main floor and reluctantly opened its doors. They'd really have to be fixed again, Natalie thought. She was on the maintenance committee, but she couldn't remember the last time she'd made it to a meeting. Must make a note of it. Obviously the committee needed some pushing.

Natalie bent to kiss Melissa's soft cheek. "Oh, I'm late. Do you have everything?"

"You always ask me that! After we get downstairs."

"Yes, well . . . I guess it's just my funny way of saying goodbye, Melissa darling, have a good day."

She always walked the forty blocks down to Columbus Circle when the weather was fine. She told herself it was for her health—to stay fit. But really, she just liked it. She enjoyed the feel of her leg muscles stretching, enjoyed the almost—hypnotic rhythm of left-right, left-right. She threw her head back and swung along, shoulder bag bumping on one side, attaché case in her other hand, breathing in deeply. Now the real part of the day began.

At the Circle, she got a smart cabbie who knew enough not to make conversation at 8:15 in the morning. He swung the cab left on Central Park South and she looked out of the window, for all the world like a first-time tourist to the big city. She loved Central Park South—she and Jake had years ago dubbed it Fantasyland. It was so . . . *rich,* no two ways about it. Nothing upper middle-class, or lower upper-class. Unh unh. This was upper upper-upper. On the right, canopy after canopy, each one with its own beautifully tailored doorman stationed beneath, whistle at the ready to hail a taxi. Uniformed housemaids walking tiny dogs. The occasional blazered child with slicked-down hair and big backpack filled with books being ushered into a waiting limo. And on her left, the verdant edge of Central Park, bordered by a stone wall and crowned with towering old trees. Densely green and rich, rich, rich. One long block, quiet, sequestered, elegant, ending—and quite

rightly, she had always thought—in the queenly grandeur of the Plaza Hotel.

As the cab swung around the corner onto Fifth Avenue, she noted a small crowd near the fountain. Photographers. By craning, she caught a glimpse of a tall, slender woman in silvery silk, her head a foot of fluffy Afro-cut hair. She smiled widely and whitely for the cameras, completely relaxed. Her name flitted into Natalie's head and back out. A singer. A pop singer, a biggie. Lee Something. Pop music was not Natalie's favorite listening; but the sight of a celebrity striking poses at 8:23 A.M. in front of the Plaza Hotel made her feel very pleased and smug and proprietary about New York.

It was crazy to feel this way. She'd been in New York since she was 22 years old . . . a long time. 1964. My God, she thought, soon I'll have been here just as long as I wasn't. Tightness grabbed at the back of her throat for just a moment. Twenty-two years before New York, 18 years in New York, and then? . . . a large gray void loomed and then the thought was gone. She knew, for all those first 22 years, that she belonged in New York City. Her childhood in Hampton was dreamlike, marking time, and the four crowded years at Syracuse University a blur. As soon as the train plunged into the tunnel on its way to Grand Central Station, the week after graduation, she had been overcome with certainty. She was coming *home*. And she was home, where she belonged, at the heart of the world.

The lobby of the Tex Am Building was brightly lit and practically deserted. Only Harve, the ageless guard, sitting upright on his folding chair at the rear, sipping a carton of coffee, his eyes bright and watchful. "Morning, Ms. Simon. They're all up there already." Natalie smiled at him. It used to irritate her, that he seemed to keep track of everyone's comings and goings. When she had complained to Jake, he'd said: "Come on, Nat, he's making 767 Madison Avenue safe for democracy, advertising, and other forms of recreation. Aren't you glad he can spot the muggers and the Moonies? Otherwise, we'd all be dead or—worse—inundated in big white smiles and pictures of the Reverend." He was probably right; she had often heard Harve

challenge strangers, and he didn't care what they looked like or how they were dressed. If he didn't know them, they couldn't go upstairs until he called up and checked. She scribbled her signature and the time—8:25—into the book, swiftly glancing through the short list of names. DiAngelo. That was Debbie. Jeff Lawrence. Martha J. Jones. Good. But her eyes kept moving. *There* was the name she wanted to see: J. Miller. Dear Jake.

The first day she came to work at M & M, all of twenty-two years old, she was shaking in her shoes but determined not to show it. The end result was a poker face of such rigidity that she couldn't smile at anyone. She was shown by the secretary to her cubicle in the copy department, an 8 × 10 foot room, made of steel and glass partitions that went up eight feet, with a doorway but no door. She hardly saw the gray steel desk, the gray steel file cabinet, the gray steel typewriter chair, the gray steel wastebasket. Hanging on the outside of the cubicle was a black sign, lettered in white: Miss Simon. Her name, on a sign on an office, in an ad agency, on Madison Avenue in New York City! She still couldn't quite believe it. She was, as of right now, an advertising copywriter. She sat in her chair and tried to study the map of the eleventh floor, M & M Advertising.

On her desk lay a packet of papers. Tax forms and personnel cards and a health questionnaire. Under them, a brochure about M & M Advertising, a simple little leaflet listing the clients, no artwork, no pictures. Two file folders, one with stuff about Brooklyn Union Gas Company and the other about Fort Orange pencils. And on top, a typed note that said: "Look these over, come see me at ten-thirty. Can you write verse? J. W." But the thing that impressed her the most was the map: beautifully rendered in ink, of the entire eleventh floor, each office labeled with the name of its occupant, different colors for art, account exec, and copywriter, and in one of the tiny boxes, the drawing of a tiny cartoon girl and a little red arrow pointing and saying, YOU ARE HERE.

She felt stunned. Not just by the strangeness of being in a new place but by the whole unbelievable, lucky thing. I'm here, I am, I am! It's really true. I'm in advertising

and I'm a copywriter. She didn't realize until the next day how charming the map was, how much time and care had gone into it. By her third day on the job, it was framed in chrome and hanging on the wall. . . . Now, of course, it held a place of honor in her office. And now, of course, she knew better than to think that Jerry Weber himself had drawn it. He had simply given orders to one of the art directors.

But that first day, she delighted in everything. She sat in her chair, saying to herself: "This is *my* chair." And looked around the metal partitions and said to herself, "This is my office." And leafed through the papers he had left for her, telling herself, "This is my work." But she couldn't concentrate.

"*Hello* down there! . . . for the *third* time!"

Startled, she looked up. It was something of a surprise to see a shock of shaggy red hair and a pair of bright blue eyes peering over the top of her office wall, like Kilroy. "I'm the boy next door," the voice went on. "Jake's the name. What's yours?"

"Natalie."

"Hi, Nat. Do you dance?"

Do I dance? she thought, feeling very dumb. She wished she could see all of his face; it was disconcerting to converse with only a pair of eyes. Was he laughing, or what? But she smiled at the eyes and said, "Anything but a tango."

"Say, my dad has a barn and I play the kazoo." Now she got it; it was a Mickey Rooney bit. Well, okay, two could play. "Say," she said, "we could put on a show of our own!"

The hair and eyes disappeared from the top of the partition and in a moment he was tap dancing into her office, a tall skinny guy, all arms and legs, singing, "Babes on Broadway."

Enthralled, she watched as he sang it all the way through, complete with gestures, ending with a grand flourish, arms outspread. From somewhere up the hall came a loud voice, shouting: "Miller! Can it!"

"Canned and wrapped!" answered the intruder, grinning at Natalie with high good humor. "Well, Nat?"

Now that he was more or less standing still—rather less than more, for he seemed to be fidgeting all the time, tapping a foot or snapping his fingers or fussing with his hair, or straightening his tie—she could see that he wasn't quite as tall as she had originally thought, just extremely skinny.

"Well," she answered, "I watched it, too. Until four in the morning. But I was nervous about my new job. What's your excuse?"

"I watch it every time it's on. This makes eight . . . or maybe eighteen . . . but who's counting?"

Natalie said, "And anyway, my favorites are really Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Not those little *kids*! And anyway, you're more Astaire-ish than Rooney-like!"

The young man looked at her for a moment. Then he said, "I think I'm in love. Say, you're swell, Nat. D'you think . . . could it be . . . would-ja help me with a new slogan for Triple Threat breath mints?"

Natalie laughed. "You call it love . . . I call it ulterior motive!"

"I know it's awfully sudden, but you're a copywriter. You *are* a copywriter, aren't you? Of course you're a copywriter. Because this is a copywriter's row, so you *have* to be a copywriter. And I need somebody to copy from. They're *awful* . . . the Triple Threats, I mean, not the other copywriters. So, listen—"

He took her out to lunch that day; and she learned that *out* meant outdoors, *lunch* meant a paper sack of sandwiches picked up at the deli, and *to* meant a 19-block walk, full speed ahead, up Madison Avenue threading through the noon-hour crush, to a particular rock in Central Park.

They lounged on the rock, she and Jake and two other guys from M & M, munching on hot pastrami and being terribly clever and witty. The two other guys left M & M before she left to have Melissa, and she wasn't even sure of their names anymore. But Jake was Jake forever.

It was Jake who, as soon as he was promoted to group head, gave her freelance work while she was stuck home with the baby. It was he who insisted that she get dressed up—"in your grown-up clothes, sweetie pie"—every once in a while and come downtown to have lunch with him.

He was the first one to hear her first guilty admission: "God, I *hate* this being home all day every day with the bottles and the diapers and the baby poo. I thought it was going to be lovely but, my God, you know what it is? It's boring. Stupefyingly dull. I eat, drink, sleep, *motherhood*. I have motherhood up the goo, so much goddam motherhood that I think I'm going to explode, and then Jerry comes home and gets all teary-eyed and tender with me and tells me how goddam *touching* it is to see me taking care of her! My God, *touching*! Me! I can't stand it, this being cast in the role of Little Mother. While *he* won't even change a diaper! Touching!" And, to her utter surprise, she had burst into tears, not even caring if anyone else at Bruno's Pen and Pencil noticed or saw or stared. Jake sang "Come to Me My Melancholy Baby" until she laughed and then ordered her a chocolate mousse with whipped cream. That was the day she hurried home right after their lunch date, and ran into the baby's room to pick her up and kiss her over and over, as if to say, "I didn't really mean it."

So of course it was Jake who, one fine Friday, nine years ago, had rung her doorbell, quite unexpectedly, at 9:30 in the morning. When she opened the door, she found him on his knees, hands clasped prayerfully, eyes tightly closed. "Natalie, Natalie," he intoned, "You've got to come back."

"Jake! You're loony!"

"Nat, come back. You've *got* to. We need you!"

"Get up off your knees, you character. You're making a scene in the hallway they'll be talking about for six months . . . as you well know, you idiot."

But he would not move, nor modulate his voice, even when the door in Apartment 16J opened wide and old Doctor Biggs stuck out his head and demanded loudly, "Are you all right down there, Mrs. Weber?"

"I'm just fine," she called and then hissed at Jake: "Get *up*, you fool!" But she was laughing so hard, she could hardly get the words out, and she could see that he was peeking at her through his squinted eyes and struggling not to laugh himself.

"You don't understand, Nat. They're sending us snotty-nosed kids who majored in basket weaving or, worse, jour-

nalism. Nobody can write ad copy worth a *damn*, sweetie pie. You can write *rings* around them, rings."

He stretched his arms wide. "Nat, baby, let me take you away from all this. Send the kid to boarding school, tell Jerry you'll be back in a coupla years, and run away with me to Marcus & Morrisey!"

Without thinking, she said, "Yes, yes, yes. Do you mean it? Really? Truly? Oh, of course I will. I think. Oh, I can't. Get off your knees, you lunatic, and look me straight in the eye and tell me you really *mean* it!"

He stood up, straightened his shoulders, and held up two fingers. "Scout's honor. We got two new food accounts in the house, and there's no one else can do it like you." He grinned at her. "Old Man Marcus himself sent me over, sweetie pie. He said, and I quote: 'It needs a woman's touch!' So come on. Say you'll come back where you belong."

She held her breath. It was almost too good to be true. Like the answer to an unspoken, unthought prayer. That's what she'd tell Jerry: I didn't go looking, it wasn't that. The job just came looking for me. And we could use the money. She'd think of *something*.

"You may have just saved my life," she told Jake. "Not to mention my sanity, my marriage, and my virginity."

"Sweetie pie!" He enveloped her in a big bear hug. She wrapped her arms around his narrow back—God, you could feel every bone in his spinal column, every rib—flooded with warmth and gratitude. "Oh, it'll be such fun!" And then it all changed. His arms straightened and slid down her body and she could feel him breathing unevenly. He shifted his position so that they were hip to hip and his head dropped, his lips pressing the flesh on her throat. In another minute, his mouth would find hers. Her legs began to tremble. Her head was whirling and she wanted to hold him closer, wanted his lips on hers. She had to stop it.

"When I said fun," she laughed, wiggling away from him, "I meant something more on the order of an Eskimo pie!"

It was typical of Jake that he let her go immediately and that on the first day back at work, she found an Eskimo

pie melting all over the top of her desk, with a note: "You call this *fun*?"

Dear Jake.

The elevator doors slid smoothly open on the eleventh floor, and there it was: home.

2 Marcus and Morrisey, Advertising

It always made her smile, stepping out of the elevator into the softly lit glamor that was M & M Advertising's reception room. It seemed so ludicrous.

Back in the good old days, you got off the elevator, onto the very cheapest discount asphalt tile of a garish red-brown. With black-and-white squiggles. Of course, back in 1963, when she first came to work here, both the original Marcus and the original Morrisey were still around and in charge—and they were both strictly no-frills guys. No frills, translated into a lobby, meant battered oak chairs of dubious vintage lined up against the walls. It meant bare steel walls of institutional green and a metal desk as well. It meant Millie, the middle-aged receptionist who had started with M & M on its first day in 1946 and had just stayed on getting fatter and fatter behind the desk, as she crocheted endless afghans. In 1966, there was good reason why everyone in the business referred to M & M as the plain pipe-rack agency, or the Robert Hall of advertising.

Now, with Peter Marcus in command, she sank into thick silvery-gray carpet, lit by flattering pink lights sunk discreetly into the ceiling. There were rosewood walls and lighted glass display cases where prize-winning ads twin-

kled in their chrome frames. Soft Italian leather couches and chrome arc lights and lucite tables. It was like seeing your plain-Jane friend suddenly slathered with makeup. Natalie always had the feeling that you could just peel away the fancy facade, that behind it, intact, was the original, the *true* reception room, Millie and all.

The desk was the worst. It was huge, curved, and its front was mirrored—mirrored! for God's sake, only Peter would think of that—so that when the elevator doors opened, there you were facing a reflection of your body from the waist down, as if you'd been cut in half. It was bizarre and disconcerting. She'd pointed this out to Peter: "I think it makes clients uncomfortable," she'd told him. And he became quite irritated. "Curves mean *love*, Natalie, they suggest an embrace." Was that an *answer*? she had demanded of Jake; and Jake had said, "Hey, baby, when the boss says it, it's an answer." Well, at least she had good legs, she thought for the hundredth time.

At 8:30, the area was empty, of course. Gloria, the receptionist, would appear as if by magic on the dot of 9:00, gliding out of the elevator and taking her place behind her pristine desk, bare save for the lucite clipboard, the three silvery-gray telephones, and the single red rose in its Baccarat bud vase. A fresh rose was already in the vase; if the florist's boy ever missed, Peter would have his head on a platter—a tasteful silver one, of course.

When Gloria put her elegant behind onto the soft leather chair, the decor would then be complete, for Gloria always wore red, the exact same shade as the red of the rose, in every season. Red wool. Red cotton. Red batiste. Red tweed. There were bets out among the copywriters and artists whether Gloria was under orders, or just liked red. Peter was just crazy enough to see someone as part of his decorating scheme; he very easily could have ordered her to wear scarlet and to have her hair dyed that funny ash-blond that exactly matched the carpeting. On the other hand, it was possible that it was just . . . coincidence. Natalie put her money on Peter whom, she felt, was capable of *anything*. And, as Jake so often said, "She does add a touch of color, you have to admit it. No brains and certainly no heart, but a touch of color." Nobody quite had the

nerve to ask her. If you asked Gloria the *time*, for God's sake, she looked at you as if this was the absolutely last straw in a world that asked too many things of her. "There's a clock on the wall near the water cooler," she would announce, ignoring the outsized watch on her wrist. If you wanted her to take a message, she would say haughtily, "I believe you have a secretary *somewhere in there*."

Well, Natalie thought, I have a lot of work to do *in there*. She wondered idly as she made her way down the aisle to her office—one of those outside offices, now, with a window—whether Gloria had ever been *somewhere in there*. She rather thought not. She doubted that Gloria had any idea what went on behind the gleaming facade of reception.

Debbie was already at her desk, right outside Natalie's office, typing gingerly. She had just painted her nails, a daily ritual.

"Do you think Gloria ever goes to the bathroom, Debbie?"

Debbie stopped typing and looked up at her boss with wide-open, unblinking eyes. This was necessary to keep the several coats of wet mascara from smudging. Today her lashes were dark blue, as was her outfit. "No," she said after a moment. "No, I don't think so. First off, she's plastic, everybody knows *that*, so she doesn't need to. Secondly, nobody's ever seen her in the ladies' room. So . . . no. Gloria never goes to the bathroom."

Natalie grinned. "I love you, Debbie," she said. Debbie smiled back, carefully, because of the shiny layer of bright coral lipstick. Debbie came on the subway every morning from Bensonhurst in Brooklyn, a blank canvas; but by the time anyone here saw her, Jeff Lawrence in particular, she was the finished portrait of the up-and-coming, bright-but-sexy, from-Brooklyn-but-I'm-moving-to-Manhattan-soon, secretary.

"The kid from Marge-and-Lew's is late," said Debbie. "I called them ten minutes ago and they swore he was on his way. Hmph! One block and an elevator ride. That kid's just plain *lazy*. Either that or Harve's his bookie."

Natalie laughed and went into her office. The blinds were up—she liked a lot of light—and all relevant memos,

reports, and copy were neatly arranged on her desk. The blessed Debbie. I hope, she thought, that Debbie's dream is to be someone's perfect secretary forever—mine, for instance—and not a secret desire to become a copywriter: 'Cause I won't let her. She had even watered the 17 potted plants that threatened to take over the corner near the window.

Natalie liked her office, which was yellow and orange with a couple of wicker chairs and a Rya rug. One wall was covered with her favorite ads and another wall with photos of her family. And that was the extent of her attempt at interior decoration. There were a few things she loved—bright, warm colors, wicker, plants; but she really didn't care where she worked. She could work in a cave.

Work. Her calendar had been opened to today, with all the appointments neatly penned in by Debbie in her precise parochial school script. Most of them, she remembered herself, of course. 9:30 Annual Report. As if she could forget! Millard for 10:30. Oh dear, the food person. She scribbled "Call Agency." Lunch with Peg Forrest, GOURMET at 1:00. At 3:00 she saw, in big black letters, definitely not Debbie's: BRAINSTORM. BRING BRAIN(S). Oh Lord. Peter. He was always wandering around the office at all hours of the day and night. Her lips tightened a trifle. He was the boss, of course, but he might stay out of her private office when she wasn't there. He had sat down in her chair to print her a message and then? What else had he done? How many drawers had he tried? What did he riffle through? What had he read? "Oh Christ," she groaned.

"You called?"

She was smiling even before she raised her eyes. "Good morning, your deityship. Just stroll on the water and have a seat." She looked up and grinned at him. Dear Jake. Still as gangly as a boy, all arms and legs. He affected heavy tweed suits and vests, but the clothes could not hide the fact that he was still as skinny as an adolescent. Lean face, puckish red head, fair, and freckled. Only the permanent creases at the corners of his eyes showed that he was over 30. In fact, he was her age.

He had obviously been in for quite a while. His vest was unbuttoned and his shirt sleeves folded up. The expensive silk tie was half unknotted and askew as usual. He was bearing the familiar Marge-N-Lew cardboard tray, loaded with its gently steaming styrofoam cups, paper-wrapped Danish pastries and one lone frankfurter heaped with sauerkraut, mustard, and relish. He plopped it down on her desk and made a face. "You know," he remarked, "I think that Jeff's breakfast hot dog has gone beyond bizarre into repulsive."

"Oh, leave him alone. What does he know about nutrition? He's only a poor bachelor."

From the doorway came a tangy drawl. "What do you mean: *poor*? Bachelors are prized in this here town, lady. You ever hear of an eligible *husband*? Huh?" Jeff Lawrence eased himself in, and with one smooth movement, plucked up the frankfurter and had it half wolfed down.

"Yeah. Yours truly." Jake poked among the Danish, unwrapping all of them, fingering and then rejecting each one in turn. Natalie gave him a slap on the hand. "Pig! Get your hands off the food!"

"Only if I can put them on you, m'dear, heh heh! God knows you're a helluva lot tastier." He leered, picked a pastry at random, and slumped down in a wicker chair, his long legs thrust out in front of him, his lanky body curved like a question mark.

Lightly, Natalie said, "Not in front of the children, dear." But she was annoyed. He was too damn quick with the sexual innuendos. It was nobody's business! Her kiddies were smart, all of them, and one of these days, they were going to catch on.

"Hear that, Lawrence? We mustn't even hint at S-blank-X. Your fearless leader is pulling a Mary-Claire McGuire."

She caught Jake's eye and made a motion toward Debbie, still busy typing right outside the door. Mary-Claire McGuire was Debbie's best friend at M & M.

But of course, her warning look only made him keep right on. "Hell. even Debbie's getting weary with Mary-Claire . . . aren't you, Debbie dearest?"

"Be in in a sec, Mr. M.! Can't hear you!" she called.

"Jake!" Natalie shook her head at him. He could be so exasperating, like a naughty little boy. And, just like a naughty little boy, lovable at the same time.

"You know that Mary-Claire's family changed their name, don't you, Jeff?" Jake said blandly. Jeff groaned and stuck his fingers in his ears. "Not again," he pleaded.

"Yup. Their name isn't really McGuire . . . it's McGinsberg."

"Jake!" Natalie protested.

"And here's Martha J," Jake announced, waving a languid hand at the door. "Tell us, Martha honey, what's your family name really?"

"We is Joneses. We is always been Joneses. And we is gonna *stay* Joneses, Massa Jake." The girl in the doorway was a startling sight: stick-thin, wearing a bronze velveteen jumpsuit that accentuated her boyish figure, her hair in 20 or 30 elaborate corn-rowed braids, with wooden beads and bright bits of yarn twisted in. Her skin was the color of chocolate ice cream and just as smooth, and over her large lustrous eyes she wore bronze-tinted glasses in enormous round frames. She marched in and took a container of coffee and sat down next to Jeff Lawrence.

"Nonsense, Martha J! You may look black, you may even think you're black, but in actuality, you're a nice Jewish girl whose name was originally Jonesowitz."

Martha J's laughter came straight from her stomach, loud and deep and contagious.

"However," Jake added, "maybe I like your present heritage. I liked the sound of that Massa Jake. Wanna say that again for me? Just once? Please?"

"Up yours . . . Massa Jake."

"And will you eat a Danish for me today? We have here prune, cheese, pineapple, and yes, by God, a real live, old-fashioned sticky bun."

"You know I don't eat," said Martha J.

"I keep hoping. Just ten more pounds on you, Martha J, and you and I could . . ."

"Okay, Jake," Natalie said firmly. She brushed the pastry crumbs from her fingers and pulled her chair up close to the desk. "Show time is over. Go write jingles or what-

ever it is you do over there in the cigarette and breath mint group. Us food people, we've got to get to work."

Jake got up, taking his time, stretching a little. "What I don't understand," he said to Martha J, "is what the *hell* you're doing writing about food when you obviously exist on nicotine, caffeine, and Dentyne."

"It's the Dentyne that does it, Massa Jake. That's where I gets my vitamin D." She grinned at him.

"That's not even a very good joke. I'm going to my troops, where there's a laugh a minute." They all groaned at that. Jake was a group head, like Natalie, and his four writers were all earnest young married men. "Not a giggle in the group," he was fond of saying. "And they call me 'sir'!"

At the doorway, he stopped to bow Debbie in. "And heeeeerrrre's . . . Debbie! Brooklyn's answer to Bo Derek!"

Debbie scuttled around him, her eyes averted. She never knew what to do about him; never seemed sure whether his kidding was friendly or a way of laughing at her. Consequently, she tried very hard never to look at him or speak to him directly.

Natalie thought, for the hundredth time, that she really must speak to Jake about this. He could be nicer if he wanted to. And she'd make him want to. Debbie was turning into that rarity of rarities: a jewel. And she didn't want him to louse it up.

"Come eat, Debbie," she said.

As usual, Debbie turned pink the moment she looked at Jeff. And, as usual, Jeff seemed not to notice that she could barely breathe in his presence. Natalie knew better. Her little Jeff was one sharp cookie who didn't miss a thing, particularly when the thing was female. She'd seen him often at lunchtime, in the lobby, meeting his lady friends. As far as she could tell, they had all been stamped out with the same cookie cutter: slim, chic, stacked, and braless.

Jeff was every girl's dream: that tall, dark, and handsome guy who usually existed only in the imagination. When he came to work wearing his Princeton letter sweater, you could hear the sighs for seven blocks. Natalie had speculated—very briefly—what he might be like in the

sack. He had the body, all right, and probably the imagination. The soft, slow drawl and the soft, slow smile made you think he was sweet, easygoing, a cute little puppy-dog of a fellow. But no. He was just a bit too careful, a bit too tight around the edges . . . a bit too calculating, she thought. The kind of guy who would sneak looks sideways at the mirror, right in the middle of everything, to see how well he looked doing it. She preferred her sex on the steamy, unthinking side. Jeff Lawrence was, she felt, the old-fashioned kind of lady-killer who did everything for his own benefit.

Debbie didn't know when she was-well-off. If Jeff ever decided one fine day to give the kid from Brooklyn a break, he'd give her a break all right—straight to the heart, as they used to say in the movies. She could write the scenario with her eyes closed: take her to bed, put her in a taxi with a kiss, and then the next day, pretend it never happened.

And, anyway, it was always a mistake to fool around with someone in the office. It was always a disaster for at least one. Except for her and Jake, maybe. But that was different. They went back a long way. She scribbled a note on her calendar, only half facetiously: talk staff re: incest.

"Okay, kids," she said, "the rest of you, to work." She handed Jeff his copy for the Tri-State Egg Group's new campaign. "It's quite clever, Jeff, but remember, those egg people don't like *too* much clever. So, plain English, please."

"Hah!" snorted Jeff. "That's a laugh and a half. The campaign is Eggs *International*, remember?"

"Don't get smart. All I'm saying is, it's wonderful to headline the French soufflé recipe *'Vive l'Egg'* because everyone knows what *vive* means. But when you start playing around—as in '(N)uova'—okay it gives you and me a chuckle. But nobody else is gonna get it except maybe a few Italians. The client especially is not gonna get it. And if the client doesn't get it, someone else gets the account. Get it?"

"Got it. Heck, but I loved it . . ."

Shyly, Debbie said, "*I* loved it too, Jeff." He had turned

to her with a smile when Martha J put in, "Well, I got it—I'm a college grad-u-*ate*—but I don't think it worked." And his attention was immediately riveted on the black girl—in a way that Natalie didn't particularly like. Swiftly, she underlined her little incest note to herself. Twice.

Martha J had two new assignments and was to check with the kitchen about the new recipes for *Love'n'Oven* baking mix. Millard the chef had been grumbling about Love'n'Oven . . . "My dear," he had groaned, "a popover is the simplest thing in the world to make from scratch . . . whatever is the *point*? And besides, everyone *knows* popovers don't need baking powder. And that mix is absolutely replete with baking powder."

And Martha J had patiently explained, "Millard baby, the folks out there in baking-mix land *don't* know. All they wanna know is, how can I do it without working at it?"

Today, he was due to come up with a crepe made from the mix—something he had declared he would *never* do because it was a desecration.

"I guess, Martha," Natalie said, "you're going to have to spend some time hand-holding."

"I know. But don't worry, boss lady. The food machine is making funny noises again. It'll be a trade-off. He wants his Wunder-Full food processor fixed by me, he'll have to do a batch of crepes, that's all."

By quarter to ten, they had all cleared out and she could get to her part of the annual report . . . the list of publications for the pita bread account, which the space buyer said had to be checked yesterday, and . . . oh Lord, the new food person. If they didn't get a new assistant today, Millard would turn her into a shish kebab. Peter Marcus was getting antsy about it, too. He was eager to get going on the health-food presentation. And Millard had made it quite clear that he would pack up his knives and leave if he didn't get some help.

She picked up the phone and dialed the number without thinking. She'd had to call them every day. What was wrong with them? Creative Cohorts, they called themselves, but this employment agency was just about as creative as a firm of accountants. What was so difficult, for

God's sake, about finding a person who knew gourmet cooking, was reasonably organized, and had a few brains? So far, Celia at Creative Cohorts had sent four budding chefs: one had turned pale when he realized he was in an ad agency; then there was a home ec graduate who was a nutrition freak; somebody from a community college trained in hotel cookery; and one tight-lipped middle-aged woman with impeccable credentials who had stormed out of her interview with Millard back into Natalie's office whispering loudly: "That man is a homosexual!" Natalie had agreed. "But I am a married woman with *children*!" the woman proclaimed. "It's not *catching*," Natalie said and the woman left in a huff.

"Celia," Natalie said, when the phone at Creative Cohorts was finally picked up, after 21 rings. "Nat Simon here . . ."

"Oh, Ms. Simon, we're *looking*, we really are," Celia burbled. "But it's a highly . . . *unusual* position, you know. Some of our applicants don't even know what food assistant *means*."

"I don't care if they know what it means, Celia dear. I just care if they can do it. Are you using the test questions?"

"Oh, yes, Ms. Simon. But, you know, most of them stumble on the ingredients for baba-whatever it is."

"Baba ganooj, Celia."

"Yes, well, *whatever*."

"Celia, the point is, we have to find someone. Today, preferably. And if Creative Cohorts can't find someone . . ."

"Creative Cohorts," interrupted Celia in frosted tones, "can find *anybody*. Don't you worry, Ms. Simon, I'm on it right now. We ran the ad again yesterday in the *Times*, so we'll be getting lots of new applicants, I'm sure. Shall I call you? Or Mr. Millard?"

"It's Mr. Littlefield, Celia. Millard is his first name. And call me, why don't you? It'll make things easier."

"Indeed." Celia's voice held the memory of all her runins with Millard. After his interview with the home ec graduate, for instance, he had called Celia to say, "Oh really! You must be *joking*." And had hung up without

waiting for a response. Millard was not always easy to deal with.

The minute she hung up, Natalie forgot all about it. It was one of the qualities that had made her successful in the ad game: her ability to deal with whatever was next, without any hangover from the previous problem. It was also the quality Jerry hated most in her: *selective amnesia*, he called it.

"Debbie!" she yelled, and within minutes they were hard at work, clearing up the TO-DO pile. They were actually down to the bottom piece—the food section of the annual report—and had, together, decided that they really couldn't even start on it until Accounting made a list of profits from each of the food clients. They grinned at each other with enormous pleasure: "It's always nice to come up with a way of passing the buck," Natalie said.

She was thinking that probably Peg Forrest would buy her a really terrific lunch . . . those magazine people seemed to have so much *time* . . . and her mouth was watering for a really terrific lunch, with a nice magazine writer who would then do a wonderful feature on 2,000 ways to fix pita bread, and Papa Hasahni would kiss her on both cheeks and Paul Hasahni would double the budget for Ali Baba bread for next year and Peter Marcus would immediately make her a vice-president.

As if pulled in by her thought waves, Peter Marcus materialized in the doorway, elegantly dressed and shod as usual. Some of the M & Mers had been known to refer to him as twinkle toes, and Jake had been keeping count of his shoes. So far, he was up to 47 pairs. "Good," Peter said. "I was afraid you'd be gone for lunch." He smoothed back his long wavy iron-gray hair with his long elegant hands.

"Since when do I disappear for lunch at eleven forty-five?"

"Well, this time I thought you might have. And, dear Natalie, you *don't* have a lunch date today. Tell me you don't."

"I don't, Peter." She paused, smiling. "That's a lie. Actually, I do."

"Wrong, darling. Actually, you don't. As of this moment. Ah, don't be angry, darling. I *need* you."

Natalie motioned for Debbie to leave and looked over at him balefully. "You've changed it, haven't you, Peter? You've changed it to a lunch brainstorm."

Peter grinned sheepishly. He loved his brainstorms. All very well. But he didn't love to eat lunch. Peter never ate lunch. There wouldn't have been a bite at his lunchtime brainstorm except that his secretary, Mary-Claire, was their note-taker. And Mary-Claire refused to miss a meal. Alas, Mary-Claire was mad for tuna fish on white bread with mayo, and that's what she always ordered, in quantity.

"I must have you there, Nat," Peter said, waving his hands about in the dramatic way he favored. "We need names for that health-food line . . ."

"Wait a minute!" Natalie frowned. "I thought this was the cigarette brainstorm. The health-food pitch is *mine* and you know damn well I'm not supposed to *be* there."

"Ah, but, Nat—"

"Peter, you made up the damn rule! 'No group head of any account shall be included in a brainstorm session on that account.' I mean, the memo even has all your own adorable misspellings in it."

"Well, but I want you there. They're pressing me; they want all the presentations a month earlier." Natalie started to protest, but he waved her silent. "I'm sure the people at J. Walter Thompson and BBDO aren't arguing with the boss."

"But I have an important lunch meeting with *Gourmet* . . ."

"Yes, well, darling, I'm the president of this agency." The smile was as sweet as ever, but the glint of steel shone out of his pale eyes.

After all this time, she knew better than to meet him head-on. She should have sold him on the luncheon with *Gourmet* and let *him* decide it was more important than her being at the brainstorm. And instead, she had played wise-ass, had indulged herself in wisecracks and so-called witticisms. Okay, it was going to be tuna fish and Wonder bread, and two endless hours of positive thinking.

"Right," she said, already wondering what she would say to Peg. "Okay, brainstorm it is."

Peter immediately launched himself into the room, flinging himself across her desk so that their noses nearly touched. "Oh, Natalie, darling, believe me, I'm not pulling rank on you . . . well, maybe a little bit I'm pulling rank on you . . . But I depend on you, darling, I need you in that meeting . . ." He gazed deep into her eyes.

Natalie knew what to do. Whenever Peter got his way—which of course he was bound always to do, since he *was* the president—he always tried to make up. He not only wanted you to give him his own way, he wanted you to love him for making you do it. Okay.

She gazed back at him as wide-eyed as she could manage and murmured, "I know, Peter, I know, I know . . ." It was what she always murmured at these moments, in answer to whatever he happened to be saying. And it always satisfied him completely. She just had to get the right cooing tone. And then she had to put her hand over his and give it one pat and that signaled the end of the scene. She put a hand over his and gave a light pat, at which he heaved a great sigh, straightened up, and said, "Well, then. That's all settled. Twelve-thirty, my conference room."

Well, it wasn't *quite* settled. She waved him out and leaned back in the chair, trying to figure out how to back out of lunch gracefully, yet, get reinvited immediately. But evidently she was too hungry to think. No brilliant idea suggested itself. She buzzed Debbie and when the girl appeared in the doorway, she said, "Debbie, listen. My luncheon with Peg Forrest has to be canceled. Give her the old Sheepshead Bay charm-school razz-ma-tazz and send her a bottle of wine from Sherry's, and hint strongly yet subtly that another date would be welcome."

"Are you devastated or just sorry?"

"Something in-between, I think."

"How about extremely disappointed?"

"I'll go for *very* disappointed. Extremely is for senior editor or above . . ."

"Gotcha." Debbie disappeared and a moment later Natalie saw the telephone light go on. Good. It was being taken care of. It was so wonderful when someone else took care of things for a change. So now she had half an hour, all to herself, to catch up or maybe even, God forbid, do some of

her own writing. Ali Baba was her very own account—it had been the very first thing she worked on when she came back, and she didn't care how many writers and secretaries and art people they gave her, she wasn't going to stop writing the copy or dealing with those crazy Arabs whom she loved. Maybe they'd like a new slogan or something. . . . She laughed out loud. Grandfather Hasahni, the old man himself, had dreamed up their slogan. "Forty Thieves Couldn't Steal the Taste!" Wonderful. She knew damn well nothing and nobody would ever change it. And besides, she really loved that crazy slogan. Well, a few sketches of some of those dreamy breakfast ideas she'd had this morning. . . She reached over to the wall bookcase and pulled down the big sketch pad. Now for a nice, freshly sharpened #2 pencil.

But she never got as far as the #2 pencil. First the phone rang and it was Melissa asking if she could have a friend sleep over even though it was a school night. "Melissa, you *know* the answer is no. Besides, you have a piano lesson. And besides, what kind of thing is that to call me at the office for . . . which?" "Well, could she come Friday night?" Melissa said and then muttered something unintelligible into the phone. "Speak up, Missy, I can't understand a word you're saying." More garble. "Dammit!" Natalie exploded. "I thought you knew better, Melissa. The answer is no. Not tonight and not Friday and next time, ask me at home!" Only after Melissa had hung up with many profuse thank yous did she realize what the child had been muttering: "Say no, Mommy. Just say no." Oh. Some kid had invited herself, apparently, and Missy hadn't known how to say no. Tonight when she got home, they'd work out some signals, or something.

And no sooner had she put the phone down than Jake came in to complain about the brainstorm and then, while he was sprawled there, ready to talk forever, ignoring her pointed comments about needing some time to think, Millard dropped by, his arms wrapped around two large shopping bags full of greenery.

"Leeks," he announced. "Also, shallots, garlic, onion, and scallions. We shall see which of these dear little smellies will dance with my new egg recipe . . . which one

overwhelms, which one enhances, and which one wafts my creation heavenward . . ."

Jake snorted and hooted. "Really, Millard, *wafts it heavenward*? Did you really mean to say that?" He grinned at the chef with good humor; they had known each other for many years.

"I'm the chef, my dear Jake. *You* are the writer. The thing is, Natalie, I can't seem to find Jeff anywhere, and Eggs International *is* his campaign and I can't remember whether he wanted a quiche or a soufflé this time. Do you?"

"No. I thought soufflé but now that you say quiche, I seem to remember quiche. Why don't you wait till after lunch? That's probably where he is. No? Then why don't you flip a coin? No? Well then . . ." Natalie stopped.

"I'll just have to do both. Oh dear. I really could use another person in there . . ."

"Yes, dear Millard. I already put my daily call into Creative Whoosies. First thing! She has faithfully promised us a living, breathing food person. Soon."

"Soon!" Millard lamented, backing out of the office. "That's the story of my life! Soon!"

Natalie watched him drift off. And the story of *my* life, she thought, is that Jake is going to sit here and schmooz until we're late for the brainstorm.

And they were. Seven heads swiveled and seven pairs of eyes glared accusingly as they entered. A large platter of soggy-looking sandwiches graced the middle of the oval table, and the aroma of tuna fish hung in the air. Over on the so-called bar were half a dozen giant economy-sized bottles of soft drinks.

Jake waltzed in saying, "Gee, I just had a terrific idea. Let's have a brainstorm with all the group heads and the boss, and Mary-Claire can order us terrific tuna fish sandwiches and maybe we can have coke and orange soda and we'll sit around and think of some terrific ideas for health food. Waddya think?"

Of course, they all laughed. People always did. That's probably why Jake never grows up, Natalie thought suddenly. She had no further time to explore this very interesting notion, however, because Peter was hopping to get on

with it. And get on with it they did. And on and on and on and on. Between gas-producing bites of soggy sandwiches and sips of what turned out to be warm soda, the seven group heads and the president of Marcus & Morrisey dreamed up, by actual count, 87 terrible slogans, 34 campaign ideas of dubious worth, and 22 recipe ideas almost guaranteed to make Millard retch in agony. But Peter Marcus was in his particular heaven. Periodically, he would gaze about him fondly and then exclaim: "*This* . . . this is what it's all about! A group working together for a common cause!"

The first time he said it, Andrew Lowell, group head for industrial products and a man, in Natalie's opinion, with the soul of a CPA, beamed and announced: "That's it! I see it clearly: a two-page, four-color spread with a photo of the whole line of Nature Boy health foods all spread out and underneath, it says: 'This . . . this is what eating is all about!' "

"I don't think—" Natalie started; but Peter put out a hand and shook his head. "Buzz! Buzz! No negative thinking, Natalie darling."

"Okay then," she said, "Let me put it this way: I positively think that that is the worst line I've ever heard."

Jake groaned loudly in mock dismay, but Peter, she saw, was truly irritated; and Andy Lowell cried out, "That's not *fair*, Nat!" Poor Andy; he was not the hottest creative thinker in the Western world. So then she had to apologize all 'round, and then swear that she loved his line and that she'd only been kidding. And all the time, Mary-Claire's busy little hands were taking down every golden word in Pitman shorthand, or speedwriting, or whatever it was that she did. And that's how it went, on and on and on, until finally they were all allowed to stagger out at 3:52.

Natalie stomped back to her office. "Don't bother me, Debbie, I'm in a post-brainstorm depression!" She slammed the door but it bounced open again, ruining her gesture completely. Damn, would *nothing* work right today? Damn, damn, *damn* anyway! Something had better happen if this day were to be redeemed . . . and it had better happen soon!

3 Lucky Barbara Valentine

"*The cat just barfed all over my pillow,* Ma. Ma? Mom? *Mother*!"

"Huh?" Barbara said thickly, coming unwillingly out of sleep, trying to hold onto the remnants of her dream. "Wha'?"

She finally managed to open her eyes, squinting. It was her son Scott, all six feet of him, wrapped in his army blanket.

"Ma, did you hear me? Tiger just *threw up* on my pillow!"

Still groggy, she pushed herself out of the warmth of the bed. Her husband's hand fell away from her hip and he complained without waking.

"Shhh . . . Scott, Dad's sleeping," she whispered.

Half asleep, she staggered past Scott into the bathroom where she grabbed a sponge and a handful of tissues. She trudged up the stairs, yawning, with Scott practically stepping on her heels. "Jesus, it *stinks*, Ma. Yuck!"

Scott's room looked like engineer heaven, pieces of machinery strewn everywhere. She remembered where the bed was—a good thing in her state—and headed for it unhesitatingly, watching out for the odd bits of mechanism on the floor. She pushed Tiger off the bed. The big cat meowed, but went. Barbara mopped at the mess, stripped the pillow, and flushed the tissues down the kids' toilet, care-

fully not looking to see the state of the bathroom. She didn't want to know.

And all the time, Scott stood in the hall, huddled into his blanket, punctuating every move she made with loud "Yucks" and "Hurry up, Ma!" and "Don't step on my tuner!" And then, from the room next door, Jenny's voice: "Shut *up* there, would you! I'm trying to meditate!"

"Tiger threw up again!" Scott shouted.

"Oh Lord, is *that* all! You are a nerd, Scott!"

"Oh yeah? Well, next time, let him vomit all over *your* virgin bed!"

"Shut up! Mom! Tell him to shut up!"

Barbara could feel that certain headache, the one she knew so well, starting to press at the base of her skull. Best to ignore their bickering. "What time is it?" she asked, hoping to change the subject. Five past seven. Oh, goodie, she could get another whole hour of sleep before Mark got up. Scott shuffled back into his room without another word and slammed the door. "You're welcome," she muttered and stuck her tongue out.

As she passed Jennifer's door, she stopped, hesitant. Her little girl had changed so quickly . . . or had she? Did every mother want her daughter to stay close, to tell all her secrets, to *need* her long after she'd grown beyond it? First it had been secrets with her friends. Then she had suddenly become a loner, coming home by herself after school and shutting herself in her room. And now, meditating. *Meditation.* Where had she learned how? It was a mystery. And she seemed to be more and more into it lately . . . refusing to join family outings and making excuses to be alone. Was it quite healthy in a 16-year-old? Shouldn't she be on the telephone all the time, giggling with her friends and talking about boys? I certainly did, Barbara thought. I'm not so old I can't remember *that.*

So what was it with Jennifer? Whenever she thought about it, she got a helpless feeling. She sniffed at the air, but there was no telltale sweet, cloying odor from under the door. The school had held a round-table discussion on the drug problem and she had gone and taken notes. She knew what to look for and how to look for it. And she

could say with absolute certainty: Jenny was not smoking pot. Barbara lifted her hand, ready to knock on the door, but no. Jen was a big girl now, nearly an adult. Nowadays she glared if she thought you were invading her privacy. And it was so early in the morning. I'll talk to her this evening, Barbara decided, and went thumping down the stairs, her thoughts longingly centered on getting back into bed and curling herself around Mark's warm body.

Darn that Scott, waking her like that for such a dumb thing! At 15—well, almost 15—he was perfectly capable of cleaning up that tiny little mess.

Well, at 39, what ailed *her*, come to think of it? Why hadn't she told him to go away and take care of it himself, as any sensible woman would have done?

Obviously, Barbara Valentine—housewife, mother, nearly 40—was not a sensible woman. "I'm a doormat," she muttered to herself. She knew damn well she was a doormat. She'd taken a quiz six months ago in an old *Ms.* magazine—"Are You a Doormat?"—and she had passed (or failed depending on how you looked at it) with flying colors. A nearly perfect score.

Would she give up her plans if someone else said they needed her? Yep. Did she always go on vacation where her friend-mate-lover-spouse preferred? Oh, sure. Did she pride herself on her "flexibility"? Indeed she did. Was the boss's word law? Well, considering she'd never held a real job in her life, that made Mark her boss and the answer was a resounding usually.

But *Ms.* magazine didn't take into account that she happened to be married to a brilliant and sensitive architect who always had wonderful ideas, and with whom she was still madly in love. The only thing she got right on the quiz was No, she didn't get up early to give her family breakfast. But that was only during the last year. Yes, she was a doormat, plain and simple. Leaping up this morning without even thinking to cater to that overgrown son of hers! And he never even said thank you.

By the time she got back downstairs, she was wide awake and too mad at herself to slide back in under the covers. Just as well, she thought, I sleep too damn much

anyway. Probably pass The Sleeping Beauty Quiz, too, if some magazine ever had one.

"Do you have difficulty getting up in the morning? Do you have difficulty getting through the day without a nap? Is snoozing your hobby? Do you ever wake up and find a few years have gone by?"

Certainly. Yes. It had happened only last spring.

It had begun like any other Thursday with Steffie. A stop in the decorating department at Lord & Taylor. Then to Saks, where a new designer department was opening. And then a stroll through Bendel's street of shops. A typical Thursday watching Steffie spend hundreds of dollars. Every week Steffie found 27 things she couldn't live without. This Thursday, trailing after Steffie got on Barbara's nerves. Steffie was nice enough, they'd known each other for 10 years—ever since their husbands had formed a partnership. Once upon a time, these Thursday expeditions had been their sole escape from the husband-children-PTA-household routine. Barbara seemed to recall that they had giggled a lot, that they had enjoyed shopping. Today, it was different. Perhaps it had been different for a long time.

They had gone to the Russian Tea Room for lunch and had stuffed themselves on blinis and sour cream and champagne cocktails. Then Steffie had left to go to the dentist. It was a lovely soft day, warm with milky sunshine. So what did Barbara Valentine, mother, housewife, have to do with herself on a Thursday afternoon with all her friends back in school or working, with the kids gone until late afternoon, with Mark busy on a new job—a brownstone renovation in Park Slope—and even Steffie lost to the dentist! What was there for a woman like her to do except more shopping?

She was heading for Bergdorf's when she caught the reflection of a woman in one of the black glass storefronts. Look at that, she thought to herself. The way some women just let themselves go. Not horrible. Just a bit thick through the middle, just a bit gray, hair just a bit too long. Typical matron, letting herself go just a bit too much.

And then, with a shock, she realized she was looking at . . .

herself. Herself! No, oh no! It couldn't be! But it was, it was. Quickly, she averted her eyes and hurried on, her heart hammering, her cheeks burning. I can't look like that . . . but I do. I do, but I can't. It can't be. That woman looked middle-aged. Middle-aged! Oh God, not yet! The end of youth, the end of dreams, the end of everything!

She walked right by Bergdorf's. Who gave a damn for Bergdorf's or for any of them? She was fat. She was *fat*, she was old, she was gray, for God's sake. The woman she'd just caught a glimpse of was thick, sloppy, bulging. Well, she knew she'd put on a pound or two, but how had she missed what she looked like?

Almost without thought, she headed for the subway. She had to get home, get out of there. She pounded down the stairs, feeling urgent, and then of course the train didn't appear for 15 minutes. She paced the platform restlessly, finally picking up a copy of *McCall's* at the newsstand, even though she already had it at home.

She leafed through it and there, on page 67, was the story of her life. Again. Fated to be Mrs. Typical, no matter what. A 40-year-old, overweight, affluent housewife smiled out of the page at her. Hello, sister. Squinting a bit, face just beginning to be lined, hair graying and out of date, not enough makeup, oh God.

But they'd done a make-over on this babe and there, on page 68, was New Mrs. Typical and wow! Take off 20 pounds, fix yourself up, and it was possible to look young and vibrant again. Yes indeed . . .

As her train rocketed into the station, she made the decision. A diet. Starting tonight. Lose 20 . . . no, 25 . . . pounds, that was first. And then? She pushed her way into the train car automatically, found a seat automatically, her thoughts racing. Maybe, she thought, she ought to go back to school. Georgia Van Dorn was studying urban anthropology and seemed to love it. Joan Neiman was almost a social worker—social work had never appealed to Barbara, but what about all the women from the Heights who were attending law school? Who had told her that? Come to think of it, there were quite a few women she used to sit with at the playground all those years ago who were now

in some kind of graduate school. Okay, she'd go back to school. And then she laughed at herself, causing the man sitting next to her to give her a startled, somewhat frightened, glance.

Back to school! To study *what*? There was nothing she wanted to study. What a dopey idea. She'd never really liked school very much when she was young. Still, she ought to be doing something with her life. She glanced down at the article again. The made-over woman, it said, had taken her made-over self and gone out and got a fantastic job and was now a loan officer in a bank. Not what Barbara considered very fantastic or fascinating, but what the hell, the woman now had a career. Whereas she, Barbara Valentine, nearly 40 years old, was still doing nothing but wifing and mothering. A job . . . could she get a job?

She'd never worked, never had to. She and Mark had married young—before graduation—and then there were the babies, good Lord, she'd become pregnant with Jenny while she was still nursing Scott!—and then they bought the house. Nobody who had never tried renovating a brownstone knew the hours and months and years of work it took. For 10 years anyway, that house had been practically a full-time job all by itself. And back when they started, before Mark was so successful, they did everything themselves—everything, all the scraping and the sanding and the plastering and the resanding and the rescraping. And, as Mark became busier at the office, more and more of it landed in her lap. Long after it ceased being a labor of love, she had done her duty. Every day. And while all that was going on, she'd raised the kids, had two playgroups, entertained for business, shopped the market for Mark, substituted at the office when necessary, run the baby-sitting pool, took on the presidency of the Parents' Association at St. Ann's, sold raffle tickets, and run the school's fund-raising events. Two dinner dances a year, and besides everything else, she was always the chef.

Barbara loved to cook. It relaxed her, it made her feel good. When other women complained about the amount of work there was in cooking, it was as if they spoke in tongues. She couldn't understand what they meant. Clean-

ing up a square foot of old dirt-filled parquet flooring: that was work. On your knees, rubbing endlessly with steel wool and then again and then again and then again. Tedious, boring, and in the end, it was just another clean piece of floor. Ah, but cooking a beautiful meal! That was satisfaction. First you had the lovely fresh things: ruby strawberries or thick yellow cream or fragrant feathery dill or pearly slabs of fish . . . and then you cut and sliced and chopped and everything under your hands was transformed. The liquid of the cream became a cloud of white; crunchy green and red bell peppers would melt, thaw, and resolve themselves into a *salsa* . . . the thin eggy batter would puff magically in the oven into a light-as-air soufflé. And the kitchen would smell so good. Oh, it was a pleasure to all the senses! All that abundance and yumminess! The most fun was heading the dinner committee for school: three or four women, all friends, piles of fresh groceries, newly sharpened knives, dozens of pots, everyone's Cuisinarts and largest bowls and casseroles, a sense of holiday permeating the blue-and-yellow-and-oak kitchen.

For years now, they had automatically put her in charge of the food. The planning, the ordering, the arranging, the table settings, the whole works, not just the cooking. And the dinners always made a lot of money for the school, so obviously she was good at it. Food was what she was talented at. But how did you put *that* on a resumé? Every woman cooked. How to parlay it into a job, for money? She'd probably have to sell, or demonstrate. Oh God, how grim! Would she end up being the smiling lady on the fifth floor of A & S, pushing electric woks with a forced cheeriness, pouring oil in as she talked, and smiling, smiling, smiling as she stirfried the veggies . . . oh God. She never joined the gawkers; she always hustled on by, vaguely embarrassed. Oh please, not a demonstrator, anything but that.

But she ought to be doing *something* with her life. By the time she emerged from the grimy bowels of the New York City subway system into the fresh greenery and sunlight of Cadman Plaza Park in Brooklyn Heights, she had decided that she *would* do something with her life, starting with the diet. And when she could once again fit into her

wedding dress, size 10, then she'd think further about what to do.

Well, she'd done it. By July Fourth weekend, she'd lost 35, not 25, pounds, just in time for the bathing-suit season. She took herself to Mayra at Boondi's hair cutters and said: "Do something with it." Her hair was long and thick, almost coarse. Bubbly, dark-haired Mayra with her short-cropped curls walked all around her, studying her. Finally, Mayra said, "I wouldn't cut it short. Just trim off the dead ends and make it even. And how about being a blond?" So, a blond she had become, a blond with a bagful of magic from the Makeup Center and a closetful of the latest grown-up clothes from The Office at A & S.

She felt wonderful, and she looked wonderful. She knew it. And she had proof. Mark could hardly keep his hands off her. Since the first 10 pounds slipped away, they had made love more often—and at more interesting times—than since the first year of their marriage, when it had been their constant preoccupation.

One glorious night, as they lay panting and sweating in each other's arms, he had nibbled on her earlobe and whispered: "You know what I'd like more than anything in the world?"

And, shivering in delighted anticipation, she had whispered back: "No, what?"

And he had said, "A baby."

"A . . . *what?* Did I hear right?"

"Ah, come on, Barbie doll, it would be such fun. A cute little baby, just like the old days. . . . Remember how wonderful they smell right after a bath?"

She had raised herself up on one elbow, staring at him in disbelief. "Considering you never gave any of those baths," she countered, "of course you'd remember the good smell and not the work."

"Aw, Barbie doll . . ."

"Mark! I'm almost forty, remember? Why the hell are you talking about babies? I'm all finished with that! Forever! My God, Mark, they're just about grown up . . . at last!"

He kissed her in the hollow above her collarbone, wriggling closer to her. "A baby'll keep you young," he murmured.

"And fat!"

"That's not fat! That's a little bit of me, growing in you . . . a visible expression of our love!"

"Mark!" Barbara felt torn between annoyance and laughter. Of all the fatuous things to say, while lying naked in bed nibbling on various parts of her body. "A visible expression of our love? Is that what you said? Did you really say that?" And she began to laugh.

He pulled back from her almost at once; but when she protested, saying, "It's friendly laughter, sweetheart," he pretended he had been planning to get up anyway. "I'm not mad," he said. "I'm hungry. I'm going to make a Monte Cristo sandwich . . . and I'll make one for you, too, darling."

He knew she shouldn't have anything that caloric. But Barbara knew her man, knew him well. If she turned down the stupid sandwich, he'd take it as a personal affront. Well, it would have to be cottage cheese for three meals tomorrow.

That was months ago, but he hadn't let the baby thing go. Mark never did let something go if he wanted it. Why he was so enamored of the whole idea, she couldn't figure out. It wasn't as if he loved tiny babies. Actually, he found children quite dull until they were old enough to learn how to ski or do other interesting things. And now that the kids were older and prone to go their own ways and do their own things, he had pretty much lost interest again. So what was it? A search for his *own* youth? Another proof of his masculinity? After all, he was heading for the big four-oh, too.

Whatever it was, it was a royal pain. The fifteenth time he brought up the subject—which was just last night, in fact—she reared back and said, "All I can say is: thank God for Dr. Lippis and his wonderful little loop. Because otherwise, I just know you'd seduce the hell out of me and before I knew what was happening, I'd be pregnant." He laughed, but she knew it was so. Well, another baby

was not on her list of priorities. And, anyway, she was going to stay *slim*!

By this time, she had drifted into the bathroom and was staring sightlessly at her reflection. Here she was, wide awake, at 7:15 of a Monday morning in September and what was she going to do with the rest of her life? Okay, she said to herself silently, you're up early for a change. No excuse this time that it's too late or you're too tired. Last July, she lectured herself: you quit job-hunting after only three weeks. Of course it had been hot and miserable and there were all those young, young 20-year-olds fresh from college . . . but that was no excuse. And they all snubbed you, those personnel people—but that's no excuse either.

Barbara focused on her image in the glass and heaved a great sigh. Aloud, she said, "You are lazy, that's your problem. And—admit it—scared to death."

Thirty-nine years old and never had a job. Her mother had never had a job in her entire life and thought that was just normal, natural. But now, it was different. Now, if you went to a party, people asked you what you *did* and they disdained the wife-and-mother-who-stayed-home. That was doing exactly zilch, apparently. Years ago, she'd taken to burbling about how she worked for Mark and the renovation and all that stuff. Now, she realized, she had been piling all those details up in an effort to seem as if she had a job. These days, a job was all, a job was It.

"A job!" Today she would make herself look absolutely sensational. Nobody would be able to turn her down. She'd get a job—or at least an interview—or die in the attempt. And, with a big smile, she reached into the mirrored cabinet for her big boxful of shadows and contours and pencils and blushers and toners and lotions and so on and so forth—the magical box of witchcraft that Mark ridiculed—"You're beautiful without all that junk on your face!"—but that she loved nonetheless. When she finished with all that so-called *junk*, she would look exactly the way she wanted to look: self-assured, confident, and young, young, young!

Now she looked, really looked, at herself in the glass.

She saw an attractive blond Wasp lady of indeterminate age—but definitely not middle!—with nice color in her face, no blemishes, and a twinkle in her big brown eyes. "You're cute," she told her reflection, "definitely cute, edging toward adorable. And the body is a definite improvement on the old model, not yet ready to stop traffic but it might get you a cab."

Now she felt ready to face anything—even the meat market known as the employment agency. To hell with all those pretty young things. Here comes Barbara Valentine, the picture of intelligence, competence . . . and sheer desperation.

Humming under her breath, she tiptoed past the bed into the big dressing room Mark had designed for her. Of course, little by little, he had brought his own stuff in—his running gear and his shoes and his extra tennis racquets, his cross-country stuff, and all his ski clothes—but he still referred to it as her dressing room. Never mind . . . it had been a lovely gesture on his part. She chose her prettiest panties and bra, the ones with lace, and was rummaging in the panty-hose drawer when a pair of arms suddenly wrapped around her waist, pulling her back, and a voice whispered in her ear, "Here comes the Monday Morning Special!"

Oh Lord, she'd forgotten! What time was it? "Mark, Mark, wait, the kids haven't left yet!"

He nuzzled into her neck and murmured, "Oh, yes they did, Barbie doll. While you were fussing around in the bathroom all that time, I heard them fight their way out the front door. Woke me up. Best thing they've done in weeks." He thrust his hips forward so that she could feel his erection. "Got something for you."

"Mark, listen, I just fixed myself all up. I was going job-hunting this morning."

"I've got a job for you, a job you'll *love*." He turned her around to hold her at arm's length. He was completely naked. She couldn't help it, she just went all liquid when she looked at him. Mark was a slender, neatly muscled man who tended to look skinny in his clothes. But undressed you saw how muscular and beautifully built he was. It had always given Barbara a little frisson of private

pleasure to know that she alone—at a party, say, where some of the women were flirting with him—knew what he was really like. He spoke in public in a rather precise, almost pedantic manner; and his beautiful, hollow-cheeked face showed little emotion. But get him alone and he was as he was right now: triumphantly erect, raunchy and—as she well knew—practically insatiable.

"Yeah," he said, licking his lips, "you *are* all fixed up. It's a real turn-on." He reached out and hooked one finger into the waistband of her panties, drawing her closer. "Yum-yum. Breakfast in bed."

She knew she really should insist, she really should put him off till tonight and get going. But with his lips on hers and his hands seeking out all those special places he knew on her body, she was lost. With a moan, she sank against him, her mouth opening, and pushed her hips eagerly against him.

At 9:00 o'clock, almost on the dot, he rolled away from her, groaning with pleasure. "Now you're *really* all fixed up." He grinned down at her, lying limp and exhausted in the crumpled sheets. "You're still the best piece of ass in King's County."

Barbara smiled up at him. He's some hunk of man, she thought. "Only in Kings County?"

"Well, maybe the entire metropolitan area . . . oh, all right, Connecticut and New Jersey, too."

Barbara reached up a lazy hand to caress his flat belly. "Will you give me North Dakota?"

Mark laughed and moved away. "I'd have to go to North Dakota and do some research," he said over his shoulder. A minute later, he was showering and that signaled the end of the Monday Morning Special. His head was now in the office, on the latest job.

She lay on the bed, her limbs heavy and relaxed. How nice it would be just to drift off to sleep now. Job-hunting could wait until tomorrow.

She must have dozed because, suddenly, there was Mark towering over her, all brisk and smelling of Brut, his dark hair still showing the wet comb marks, vest buttoned and silk tie pulled tight up against his shirt collar, everything centered and without the slightest wrinkle. Gone was the

ardent lover, blue eyes smokey with desire. It was Mark the architect who stood by the bed, exuding confidence and energy, prepared to conquer the world. It made her feel lethargic just to look at him.

He grinned. "You have the look of a wench well-serviced."

Barbara sat bolt upright. "Just what does *that* mean: well-serviced? How about *you*, toots? I wasn't lying there like a lox, exactly."

"Jesus Christ, Barbara, what's eating you? It was just a joke!"

"You may not realize it, Mark, but you always say something like that, every time we make love."

"I do not!"

"Oh, yes you do. Every single time. I mean, it sounds as if you think you've done me some big favor . . ."

"Whoa! I don't get it, Barbara. We just had a helluva screw, so why are you carrying on? I don't say it every time, I'd know it if I said it every time, and anyway, it's meant as a *compliment*, for Christ's sake!"

He turned away and went over to the big three-way mirror, as he did every morning, to check himself out. And, Barbara thought rather smugly, he looked terrific—as he did every morning. Maybe I have anorexic eyeballs, but slim and trim looks wonderful to me. Of course, Mark was an extraordinarily handsome man, with a chiseled face like that of a matinee idol. He was always being approached and asked to model for this, that, and the other thing. Only once had he given in and that was for his favorite scotch one year when they did a big newspaper ad campaign featuring young New Yorkers. And that was because that month he wanted a particular stained-glass window restored and the scotch company was going to pay him enough to cover it.

But the day it appeared in the *Times* and the *News*, his office phone never stopped ringing. "Everyone, Barbara, everyone in the world," he told her that evening, shaking his head in disbelief, "from old buddies I haven't seen in years who wanted to say hello, to women offering their services in seventeen exotic new ways, to Ed Bradford, supposedly a good friend, who said he was surprised to find

that I was so hard-up—! Unbelievable! Unbelievable!" He had sworn then that he'd never do that again. And he never had.

But, leaning her chin on her hand and gazing at him, she could understand why they still continued to ask him. The bones of his face were beautiful: there was no other word for it. Neat, modeled nose, broad modeled jaw, broad modeled brow, everything absolutely in the right place, including the cleft in his chin. Even his coloring was movie-perfect: black hair, fair skin, bright blue eyes. Staring at him as he looked himself over with a frown, she sighed with a mixture of exasperation and pleasure. It was almost impossible to stay mad at him. She had only to look at him to realize all over again how lucky she was that he had picked *her*. She caught a glimpse of herself behind Mark's tweed-suited reflection, sprawled on the bed, her hair tumbled and her carefully applied makeup now totally gone. Yes, sir, she thought, at my wedding the groom was a lot prettier than the bride. Mark patted at his sleek thick hair, smoothing away an imaginary bit of dirt from his jacket. He looked so buttoned-up, so proper, so dignified. Yet, not 15 minutes ago, he had been moving above her, lips bared back from his teeth in a grimace of ecstasy, eyes narrowed and hot . . .

Barbara shifted on the rumpled bed, her heart starting to pump faster. No, he'd never go for it, not now, not all dressed. Yet she had been dressed earlier, and that hadn't bothered *him*. She licked her lips and crept quietly out of the bed. He was busy checking his pockets, making sure everything was where it belonged, and didn't notice her. She was able to sneak up behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist, slipping one hand under his waistband groping for the penis, while she unbuckled his belt.

"Barbara! For Christ's sake! What do you think you're doing?!" He wriggled, but she tightened her hold.

"You always say it's better the second time."

"Come *on*, Barbara! What's got *into* you!" His voice was sharp.

Barbara unzipped his fly. She felt gleefully wicked. He was erect again. "Gee, honey," she cooed, "one of my

favorite lovers once told me that when I was all fixed up and looking terrific, it was a turn-on. Come on, Mark, you had breakfast in bed, now let's have some dessert."

He laughed, but she sensed irritation beneath it. "Honey, you know I don't like to turn down a good offer but I'm late already." Gently but firmly he removed her arms and placed them neatly at her sides. "Let's not get carried away. I need this new contract and if I don't get to work on it, I won't have a chance." He busily began tucking himself back in again and then focused his eyes on her image in the glass. "Tell you what. I'll come home early—ready, willing, and able. You just be waiting, all right? Four-thirty and not a minute later. I promise."

She watched him fuss with his tie and then with his hair and then with his cuffs, and it made her smile. What a fussbudget! All she'd have to do right now to ruin his morning completely was to say something like, "Are you sure your haircut isn't just a bit too short this time?" What babies men were! And then he turned from the mirror and gave her the familiar grin—she loved the way his eyes crinkled up when he smiled—and held his arms out for a good-bye hug. Enfolded in the familiar embrace, leaning a little into his tight leanness, sniffing at the mixture of Brut with his own clean, wonderful smell, she closed her eyes and let the moment claim her. Lucky Barbara Valentine. Come 4:30 this afternoon, she would not only be waiting on the bed for him, she'd be lotioned and perfumed and negligeed and raring to go! If she wasn't, he'd be *furious.* Mark hated to be kept waiting.

He lifted his lips from hers and said quizzically, "Something wrong?"

"Wrong! Nothing! What makes you say that?"

They looked for a moment into each other's eyes. Barbara saw herself, tiny, twice-reflected.

"Atta girl!" Absently, he gave her a pat on her rump, stretching to pick up his portfolio. And he went galloping down the stairs, whistling all the way.

4 Creative Cohorts

Lexington Avenue at 3:30 in the afternoon was, Barbara decided, the pits. Crowded, dirty, noisy with traffic, dust swirling thickly in the air, and too damn hot. She stood there just outside the Art Deco Building, which was the home of the eighth employment agency she'd been to that day, sweating and utterly disgusted. The eighth agency—and the same not very subtle lip tightening as soon as someone spotted the birth date on her resumé. She looked down now, at the stack of beautifully and expensively printed sheets held carefully on her outstretched palms, fragile, like a pastry. There it was, *November 12, 1942*, right where it belonged, in the upper right-hand corner.

So far, every single interviewer had been rendered uneasy by *November 12, 1942*. "My, my, Mrs. Valentine . . ." in a falsely chipper tone, "You've been out of the job market quite a while, haven't you?" And the double take. "Oh. I see here that you . . . er . . . haven't *had* a job before." No, no job, but I've *worked*, you dummies! And then the triple whammy. "I doubt very much that we can do anything for you. But please leave your resumé, and we'll put it in our files."

Files! Well, she was about to do the final filing job. She hefted the pile in her hands, hesitating, and then walked over to the big wire trash basket and let it all go. The whole bunch plopped in with a satisfying thump, the top sheets sliding down into the depths, to join the plastic coffee cups, crumpled newspapers and ice-cream sticks. There! No more resumé, ergo, no more birth date! Let

'em guess next time! She dusted off her hands symbolically and looked at the next personnel agency on her list.

Fifteen minutes later she was trudging up the flight and a half that led to Creative Cohorts. Creative Cohorts! What a name! But if they could find her a job, they could call themselves Creative Courtesans for all she cared. She just wished they'd put their office on a real floor instead of on the mezzanine. As a crudely painted sign announced, The Elevator Does Not Go To Mezz. She would have to drag herself up the 20 zillion stairs to Creative Cohorts. She was bone-tired. Her legs felt as if they were filled with rocks, as if she'd have to haul them up the steps by sheer willpower. She was sorry she'd worn her new suede boots. They looked elegant, but they were too damn hot, the three-inch heels were much too high, and she could feel blisters forming on every toe. The smart tweed suit had been another poor choice. It was making her itch. She had to go to the bathroom. Again. And she was sure her hair had become bedraggled and messy.

She dragged herself up to the open glass doors and halted, inwardly laughing at herself. It sounded like a list of complaints from a third-grade child. She straightened her shoulders and told herself to behave. She was smart, competent (albeit inexperienced), Barbara J. Valentine and if they asked, she was 32 . . . well, maybe 34 would be more realistic. She put on her best smile—bright, eager, youthful, and presented herself to the callow young gum-chewing thing behind the reception desk.

She was handed the usual packet of forms to fill out, and she sat down with relief, wriggling the poor sore toes gingerly, looking around before she started the stultifying task of filling in all those boring blank spaces.

Creative Cohorts was just one big open space with no partitions. An illusion of privacy was obtained by setting the desks at angles to each other. She didn't like that, she liked walls around her.

There were six other job-hunters scattered around the big echoing space, all of them young, Barbara noted with a sinking feeling in her stomach. *Everyone* was young: receptionist, interviewers, applicants—even the guy hanging

by a strap outside washing the windows looked about 16. The background disco music was turned up a little loud and mixed in with the jangling of the phones, it was disconcerting. Deep inside herself, Barbara sighed. It was probably going to be like the other places. At Carstairs . . . or was it Carfield? . . . well, whatever it was called, the second place she'd gone to this morning . . . they'd had a space on the application right after her address that said Sign. Sign what? she had wondered. What for? She'd asked the receptionist what it meant. The woman gave her a look of utter contempt. "Your *sign*, Miss. You know, like Libra? Scorpio? Like that?" Barbara had stared at her for a moment, disbelieving. "You mean . . . my *astrological* sign?" And when she received haughty confirmation, she had just put the form down very gently and left. She doubted that even a place called Creative Cohorts could come up with anything more ludicrous than that.

Oh well. Might as well start filling it out. She penned in "Barbara Valentine, 800 Orange Street, 811-3121," for what felt like the fiftieth time today. She was sharing a love seat with a wispy baby-faced girl, wearing a rayon 40s-style dress, her hair piled up in a pompadour exactly like the one on the cover of the latest *Vogue*. She looked like a child dressed in her mother's clothes, her pale heart-shaped face rouged and stylishly lipsticked in dark purple. She was filling out her forms with a stubby pencil, pausing every couple of seconds to lick the point. Barbara took a surreptitious look at the girl's application and then stared at it. She blinked and looked again. Yes, that's what it said. Date of birth: 1952. This kid, looking for all the world as if she'd sneaked her big sister's cosmetics when nobody was looking, was in reality 29 years old. My God, Barbara thought, when I was 29, I had been married eight years and had two children and was a settled matron. And I looked it. If that's what 29 looks like these days, no way can I pass for 32! Or even, let's face it, 34 or 30-*anything*!

She got up, then, and went straight to the ladies' room, where she dropped all her gear on the floor and, leaning on the sink, stared into the mirror. What did people see when they looked at her? A woman of fair skin and brown

eyes, with long medium-blond hair twisted up at the back and waving over her ears. Deep-set eyes, short nose, high cheekbones, rather wide face. But did she look *old*? She stared at herself and then had to laugh at the look of worried intensity that stared back at her. There were wisps of hair curling around her ears and at the nape of her neck. Just as she had thought. Mark would tell her to tuck them in. Messy, he'd say. Careless-looking. Oh hell! At least she wasn't gray.

The day she'd had it colored for the first time, Mark had stared at her for a moment, then grabbed her around the waist and all but pulled her up the stairs. He hadn't even let her take off her clothes. He pushed down her panties and took her with her skirt rucked up around her waist, his hands entwined tightly in her hair. At the end, he whispered in her ear: "What did you say your name was, blondie?" Later, she asked him: "You didn't *really* feel like you were making it with someone else, did you, Mark?" And he had shrugged, "You looked . . . you just looked completely changed. Oh hell, Barbara, don't make a federal case out of it! I knew it was you. Only . . . younger. Like when I first met you."

She still hadn't figured out whether she liked that whole thing . . . whether she should have been flattered or insulted. Anyway, she loved her hair now; it was exactly the same as her original shade. And anyway, she had to pee. And eventually she had to fill out that damn application and get herself interviewed.

When she got back, the baby-faced girl had left and was facing an interviewer across one of the white desks. Swiftly, she filled in all the blanks except her birth date, handed everything to the receptionist, and was told to wait. That was the story of her life today: hurry up and wait. It was nearly 4:00 already. She couldn't squeeze in any more agencies today. Okay. That meant she had to convince whomever interviewed her that she would make a dandy . . . what? She looked at the large hand-lettered sign that dominated the wall above the reception desk. Creative Cohorts, it exclaimed, in bright red cursive script, and underneath, in blue, were listed ADVERTISING AND PUBLISHING

. . . FASHION AND INTERIOR DESIGN . . . artists . . . writers . . . actors . . . editors . . . fashion designers . . . interior decorators. Nowhere did it say demonstrators . . . file clerks . . . gal Fridays . . . receptionists . . . salesgirls. She'd just say: "Look. I'll do anything. What do you have that nobody else wants?" She promised herself that morning on her way out of the house that she wouldn't go home tonight without a definite lead to a job and she wasn't going to, goddammit.

She missed the receptionist calling her name and, like a dummy, was caught staring vacantly, saying "Huh? Wha'?"

"Mrs. . . . Valentine?" Yes, she would admit to that . . . but don't anybody ask her how old she was!

"Please take these and see our Ms. Sloane. Third desk on the left counting from the first window . . ." She pointed.

Barbara followed the finger to a desk where the occupant was looking up expectantly. Was it her imagination, or did the cute little pug nose on the cute little round face of redheaded Ms. Sloane wrinkle just the slightest at the sight of this old broad limping over in her tight boots? Mentally, Barbara stuck out her tongue at . . . Celia Sloane, she saw from the outsized nameplate on the desk top.

Celia Sloane held out a limp hand that she barely touched to Barbara's before motioning her to sit down. Up close, she no longer looked 21 years old, Barbara noted with pleasure. Up close, Ms. Sloane's dark roots showed a trifle, and there were beginnings of deep grooves on either side of her carefully lipsticked mouth. She glanced at the form and murmured Barbara's name, then read swiftly, her lips moving a little. After a moment, she looked up, puzzled, and said: "But Mrs. Valentine, you have no *experience*."

"Yes, I do," Barbara said stubbornly. "See? Fund-raising, president of the Parents' Association. And the Charity Thrift Shop. I mean, that was a *business* and I was manager of it for a full two—"

Ms. Sloane pursed her lips. "Oh but, Mrs. Valentine, I don't think you understand me. That was *volunteer* work."

Barbara took a deep breath. "Ms. Sloane, volunteer doesn't mean brainless. I mean . . . it's real work—just as if

it were paid. Everything I've ever done has *made* money." She clamped her lips together angrily, to stop herself from spelling it out: m-o-n-e-y. "Look," she started, "I need a job. I'll take anything you think—" And then she stopped, ready to cry.

The woman wasn't even listening to her; her eyes had drifted back to the page. She reached down to pick up her handbag. What was the use? They were all the same! Not at all interested in Barbara Valentine, qualified person with plenty to offer, oh no. Just interested in a surface: in an unlined face, in a trim young body. She was becoming sick, yes sick, of everyone looking under 30—or trying to. Whatever happened to the older, therefore more experienced, woman? Here she was, all grown up, her job as mother nearly finished, all those years of making decisions, handling problems, budgeting money, dealing with all sorts of people: workmen, teachers, headmasters, volunteer workers . . . here she was, ready to be of use in the big world. And the big world apparently had no use for her. It wasn't fair! How now, women's lib? she thought, standing up in a fury. You set me up for a new career and sent me on my way. But you forgot to tell everybody I was coming.

Celia Sloane looked up from the application form, her eyes narrowed in thought. Then she focused. "Hey!" she said. "Where are you going?"

"Well, since I have no experience . . ."

"Wait. I think maybe I have something for you."

Barbara sank back into the chair. "You *do*?"

"Did you do all this cooking *yourself*? I mean, did you actually *cook*?"

"Of course I did."

"That's . . . how many banquets for the school . . . six?"

"Eight." Visions of a job frying chicken parts in Woolworth's flashed through her mind. Oh Lord, no . . . but then, she had promised herself she'd take anything. She'd even said it a few minutes ago, "I'll take anything." "Why do you ask?" she said, trying very hard to keep her voice casual. Let it not be Woolworth's.

Celia Sloane put down the application and looked di-

rectly at Barbara. "I have a good entry job here . . . well, it's rather unusual, not suitable to everyone . . ." Woolworth's, Barbara thought. Got to be Woolworth's and that damn fried chicken. "I have to ask you a couple of questions, okay? Okay. First . . . How do you flute a mushroom?"

"I beg your pardon?" Barbara said.

Ms. Sloane nodded. "Tell me how you flute a mushroom. Do you *know*?"

"Sure. You take a little knife, hold it at an angle to the top, and then turn the mushroom. This will make a series of even little cuts . . ." She couldn't help feeling a bit foolish; it was like being back in the fifth grade. Would Ms. Sloane give her a grade at the end?

"Good. Now, Mrs. . . . ah . . . Valentine, do you know how to repair a separated hollandaise?"

"You add cold butter to cool it down. Whipping it in works the best. But—"

"Terrific. How many tablespoons in a cup?"

"Sixteen. But I don't see—"

"Just a couple more. How do you get . . . ah . . . the most volume from beaten egg whites?"

"Room temperature eggs, warm bowl and beaters," Barbara reeled off. This was simple stuff, kindergarten stuff. Yep, Woolworth's. Although repairing a hollandaise was a cut above the five-and-ten. Macy's Cellar, maybe. "Anything else?"

"One more. The ingredients for baba . . . ah . . ." she glanced down at a paper. "Baba ganooj."

Barbara smiled triumphantly. "Sure," she said. When you lived in Brooklyn Heights, a five-minute walk from the largest Arab-American neighborhood in the United States, you knew the ingredients of not only baba ganooj but also of falafel, hummus, couscous, tabbouleh, and baklava. "It's an eggplant dish," she went on, "made with tahini—that's sesame paste—garlic, lemon juice, and served cold, like a dip."

The interviewer looked up from the card, a genuine smile on her face. Barbara thought it transformed her, really made her look cute. Ms. Sloane ought to try that

smile a lot more often. "Oh, Mrs. Valentine!" she cried, clasping her hands together with pleasure. "You got a hundred percent! That's wonderful." Barbara murmured her thanks and tried very hard to look modest. This was the strangest job interview yet.

"The job's with M & M . . ." She stopped, as if waiting for applause, and then laughed a bit self-consciously. "Marcus and Morrisey. The *ad* agency. *You* know. Well, it's a real cream-puff place, Barbara. I know gals who'd give their right arms to work there. I'm proud to say that we place most of their creative people.

"Now this job . . . it's in the test kitchen. For all their food accounts, *you* know. The chef needs a gal Friday who knows her way around the kitchen . . . not someone who just went to school and majored in nutrition, but someone who's really experienced." She leaned forward and, in a conspiratorial tone, murmured: "The chef told me one applicant, a home-ec graduate, didn't know how to boil an egg, much less beat one properly. . . . And they have a big egg account . . ."

"It sounds . . . wonderful," Barbara breathed.

"It's only an entry job. I mean, it's not a lot of money . . . they're offering twelve-five . . . but you're married and won't have to worry about paying the rent, ha ha." Here she paused and eyed Barbara with care. "But it's a lovely place to work. . . . Well, Barbara, what do you think? Does it sound like something that might interest you?"

Interest her? Was this woman kidding? She tried to look thoughtful and restrained. "Oh yes, it sounds very nice." Her heart was pounding painfully.

"Good. I'll give Ms. Simon a call right now. Be sure to take a resumé . . ." She went scrabbling through the papers on her desk. "I don't seem to have one here . . ."

With sinking heart, Barbara thought of all those resumés, sliding slowly to the bottom of the trash basket a block away. "They're . . . downstairs," she muttered, as if she had an office down there somewhere.

"Well, they'll want to look it over. And here's our card and let's see, they're paying the fee, isn't that wonderful? This is your lucky afternoon, Barbara, I just know it. Now

then. You just skip along to the ladies' room and freshen up and you'll feel a lot peppier. You go to the Tex Am Building—here's the address—to the eighth floor and tell the receptionist you want to see Natalie Simon. She'll interview you first; she's the copy chief of all the food accounts. A real sharp gal, but nice. Don't worry about your interview; you'll do just fine. Okay?"

A bit numbly, Barbara nodded. Was it really true? Was she about to get a real honest-to-God *job*? Like in all the magazine articles about second careers? She found the thought stunning. A job, she, Barbara Valentine, with a job. In an ad agency! She wondered what an ad agency was like. When she tried to picture it, all she could imagine were the offices in the Doris Day movies.

She was being motioned away by Ms. Sloane, who was eagerly dialing the telephone. Oh yes. She was supposed to throw cold water on her face and look peppy. She must have walked up to Ms. Sloane's desk looking like a fallen soufflé.

But a glance in the mirror showed an exhilarated woman, eyes alight, cheeks glowing, needing perhaps just a touch of lipstick. She applied it hastily and gave herself a big smile. A *peppy* smile, in fact. Ms. Sloane wanted peppy, she'd give her peppy! And, oh my God, the resumés! She'd nearly forgotten about them. Hastily flinging her bag over her shoulder, she clacked down the short flight of stairs and out into the street. The sun was low, casting a heavy golden light. The air seemed to be perfumed and all the hurrying people were her compatriots, her fellow workers . . . and she was a part of this scene, no longer a spectator. I have an appointment! Her heart sang. I have a job interview.

In the meantime, what if the trash had been picked up? What if someone had dumped a carton of old hamburgers into the basket? She half ran down the block, heart hammering, her thoughts running ahead, figuring out things to say if the resumés were gone or ruined. "I must have left them in the cab . . ." or no, maybe "subway" sounded better. "I've given them all out . . ."

Panting, she looked around wildly. Wasn't it here? She

was sure it had been here . . . ah, there it was, just beyond the mailbox. And there, poking patiently among the papers and mashed cups and deli bags, was a shopping-bag lady, wrapped in three skirts, three sweaters and two shawls, her feet flopping out of torn purple fake-fur slippers, long, tangled gray hair hanging down her back below the brim of a battered straw hat.

Barbara edged up and the smell of the woman nearly knocked her over. The basket was open meshwork and she could see her beautiful resumés down near the bottom, but still bunched together. The shopping-bag lady had a big dirty stick she was using to stir around for something to her liking; and Barbara winced each time the stick came anywhere near the creamy pages with their crisp black lettering. She could read them from here: BARBARA J. VALENTINE, BIRTH DATE: (censored), HEALTH: EXCELLENT, MARRIED, TWO CHILDREN, 800 ORANGE STREET, BROOKLYN HEIGHTS. Oh, her beautiful, wonderful, helpful job-getting resumés . . . she must retrieve at least one. She edged over gingerly, holding her breath. The shopping-bag lady moved at the same moment, blocking her way. Oh dear. But she reminded herself: you have a job interview. Without further thought, she pushed her way to the trash basket.

"Excuse me," she said firmly, as the shopping-bag lady gaped in toothless astonishment. Shutting her eyes, Barbara plunged her arm in, felt the smooth paper, grabbed it, and pulled up her haul, only then looking to make sure she had the right paper— BARBARA J. VALENTINE, said the paper, MARRIED, TWO CHILDREN.

And soon to be WORKING WOMAN, Barbara thought. She bore off her prize, ignoring the muttered complaints that followed her.

5 Hired!

When the phone rang, Natalie was sitting at her desk, eyes closed, head propped on her two hands, wishing she had a mantra to say. Maybe she should try "Om." It was the only one she knew. She did so, but after three repetitions found herself overcome with giggles. And then Debbie buzzed. "Celia Sloane of Creative Cohorts."

Natalie checked with the wall clock—4:10. Awfully late to call. Creative Cohorts had better come up with a live one soon. She really didn't feel like starting up with another employment agency. She really didn't feel like starting up with much of anything, to tell the truth. Peter and his brainstorms! Really, they were getting dumber and dumber. She picked up the phone with a sigh. "Yes, Celia. Good news?" Might as well start on an optimistic note.

"I have *just* the person, Ms. Simon. I just *know* you'll love her. She's absolutely *perfect*. Knew every answer and is a *lovely* woman. An older woman, Ms. Simon . . . about your age, I'd say."

Oh, swell! Natalie thought. That's all I need today: The scarlet letter. O for old. "Well, yes, Celia," she said, "she sounds fine. Send her right over." Any warm body, anybody at all, at this point.

She broke the connection and immediately dialed an interoffice number, which was answered with a baritone "Yeeeeeesssss?"

"Cohorts is sending someone, Millard. An interesting older woman, I understand . . . round my age."

"Oh Christ! Another kid!"

"Oh, Millard, I love you! Probably because you have such a keen eye and a discerning nature."

The voice on the other end of the line laughed. "My dear Nat, I may be the only man in this place *capable* of seeing a woman objectively." They both laughed, and he agreed that he would hang around no matter how late it got. "I'll work on a little something for tomorrow's client lunch . . . eggs à la Russe, or perhaps some eggs goldenrod . . . or what do you think of curried eggs, deviled eggs, eggs Florentine . . . eggs pickled, poached, scrambled, sauced, soufflèd, stuffed, sautéed . . ." He drew in a large, noisy breath.

"Either we're long on eggs," Natalie said, "or you've completely flipped."

"My *dear*! I told Tommy we needed six dozen . . . and the idiot sent over *sixteen* dozen—! Need I say more?"

Again they laughed. The stainless-steel refrigerator in the test kitchen was large. But still, it was the *only* refrigerator in the test kitchen and 16 dozen eggs were a hell of a lot of eggs. Natalie could just picture it: Millard frantically cooking up egg recipes, rolling his eyes heavenward and chortling evilly. It was so typical of Tommy Thoms, the account executive. Tommy was very handsome, very well dressed, and a very wonderful squash player. But Natalie knew from sad experience that he could not keep more than, say, two and a half facts in his head at one time.

Of course, all his clients loved and adored him. He knew what wine to order, every maitre d' and headwaiter in Manhattan knew him—by name!—and he could get tickets for absolutely anything. But even those sterling qualities paled, for the clients at any rate, in the light of Tommy Thoms's fanatical faith in all M & M clients. Tommy was a true believer. He always loved the client's product, he always used it, made a point of using it, extolled its virtues wherever he went. And thought every employee should do likewise. He was probably the only person in all of M & M—maybe the only person in all of advertising—who really swallowed everything the copywriters wrote.

Natalie had once wondered what Tommy would do if there was a change of client: from, say Kent cigarettes to

Marlboro. And then there *was* a change of client, and she found out what Tommy would do. He changed his favorite brand—instantly—as if the operator of Tommy's brain had pressed the ERASE button.

"For his sins," she said to Millard, "you should make an egg lunch for Tommy every day for a year . . . even after they've spoiled. Do you think he'd remain enthusiastic by the end of that?"

"Well," said Millard, "I only hope this applicant turns out to be someone *reasonably* suitable, Nat. None of your community-college dietitians, now. And heaven *save* me from a vegetarian. Do be sure to find out if she's a vegetarian!"

Halfway through this diatribe, Natalie realized that the subject had been switched from Tommy Thoms back to the Older Woman applicant for the job of food assistant. It had taken Natalie two years to get used to Millard's non sequiturs. "Aw, come *on*," she protested. "After all these weeks, we're still going to be so icky-picky?" And before he could protest back, the buzzer on her desk lit up and she was able to ring off. "Don't go away, Millard. Here she is now."

Her name, it seemed, was Barbara Valentine. "Send her in," she told Debbie and then crossed her fingers. "Oh, Thor, god of all thunder, war, pestilence, and ad agencies, make this one a goodie and let's be done with it, okay?"

In came the applicant on waves of *Charlie*. She was quite tall, in a suit too heavy for the weather. A good-looking woman. There was something regal about her as she strode over to the desk, hand outstretched, warm smile, with the unmistakable bearing of a woman who's always been pretty, always been welcome, always been sure of herself. The head cheerleader, the prom queen.

For just a moment, Natalie felt that old familiar twinge —the one she'd had as a semipermanent feeling all the way through her teens, the one that told her she'd never be anything but awkward, flat-chested, and an outsider. And then she really looked at the woman and noted the tiny beads of perspiration on the upper lip, felt the slight tremor in the hand. So she was nervous. It was an act, her total

ease in this situation. But it was a damn good act. You had to be as sharp as Nat Simon to catch on. Their eyes met for a brief moment, candidly.

I think I'm going to like her, Natalie thought, and took Barbara Valentine's hand with a bit of extra, supportive warmth. The other woman responded with a quick, almost relieved, smile.

"Sit down, sit down, uh . . . Ms.? Valentine."

"Oh, Mrs. is fine." She smiled. "I've been married a long time." She slid a resumé across the desk.

Natalie scanned it quickly. Two big kids: teenagers . . . so no problem about baby-sitters. Brooklyn . . . But that was *her* problem. Married so she wouldn't add to the incest problem. And, anyway, she'd be working mostly with Millard, who didn't dig girls. Natalie looked up at this latest candidate. The rosy afternoon sun, slanting in the window, burnished the classic face and lit up the nap on the tweed jacket. A 100 percent blond WASP, all right . . . now, if only she would turn out to be just minimally stupid.

"Ummm," she murmured, buying time, glancing once more at the resumé. "So . . . a graduate of Boston University. But I don't see the year . . ."

There was a funny little silence. Natalie looked up. Their eyes met again, and Barbara Valentine dropped hers quickly. And then she looked up and laughed. "I don't give dates anymore," she said. "I don't like to think about them."

Good for her! Nobody's business. Who cared anyway? Not Natalie, supposedly the same age. But Celia Sloane had been wrong, she thought with a slight pang. Barbara Valentine was younger than she. "I know what you mean." They smiled hesitantly at each other. "Did Celia Sloane give you a hard time?" she asked suddenly.

"No . . . well, a little. Mostly about my being a volunteer. And I've heard *that* one so often . . . I'm afraid I got a bit . . . huffy?"

"So why do you think she sent you over?"

There was no hesitation. "I passed the cooking test with flying colors." Another amused smile. "If there's one thing I know, it's food."

"You don't look it." To Natalie's surprise, this brought a bright, sudden blush.

"Thank you, Mrs. Simon . . . Ms.?"

"Ms., please. No, wait. Natalie, actually. We're not very formal around here, as you will see." Wait a minute, she told herself, you can't hire her after two and a half minutes, just because Celia Sloane bitched her a little. And anyway, you can't hire her without Millard's blessing. And, in spite of all her charm and seeming poise, the woman had never held down a job before! What if she couldn't hack it? What if she fell apart the first time Millard went into a snit? What if she tried to run things in the kitchen? Natalie cleared her throat and said hastily, "And why have you started to look for work now particularly?"

"Because I've never had a real job and it's time I did something about my future. After the kids go, and so forth."

"Empty-nest syndrome? I thought they'd cured that!"

"Children still grow up and leave home." There was a trace of acid in the voice, although the face did not change. "I've never been idle . . . besides all the volunteer work, I also work with my husband. He's an architect and I've always done his fabrics . . ." She stopped suddenly and took a deep, discernible breath. "I want to be paid for my labor, that's all."

"I just hope you weren't looking forward to being liberated from the kitchen?" Natalie laughed, hoping to get the other woman to join in. But Barbara Valentine merely smiled. "And another thing . . . *you've* been running all these banquets and things. But here at M & M there's only one person running the kitchen and that's Millard Littlefield. He's the highest of the high . . . and I'm afraid that makes you—"

"The lowest of the low," Barbara supplied. Now she laughed. "That's okay. I don't mind."

"I want to make sure you understand what that means," Natalie said. "It means a lot of scruffy work: peeling potatoes, peeling tomatoes and stuffing pitas and separating eggs—oh boy, will you have your hands full separating eggs!—dipping grapes . . . oh Lord, I don't know all the

details. I only know *I* wouldn't know how to do *any* of it! . . ." Natalie suddenly began to laugh. "I never cook! I hardly know what any of that *means*! I don't know what I'm talking about! I'm just repeating what I heard Millard tell some of the others . . . I guess what that means is: you'd better go talk to *him*. . . ." In the small silence that followed, the two women regarded each other thoughtfully.

Ms. Simon was measuring her again, Barbara thought. She was leaning forward over her desk, hands folded, eyes narrowed. She looked so executive—small, neat, compact, full of crackling energy. You could almost see the sparks shoot off her skin. Like Mark. You got the feeling that the persona was barely able to be contained by the body, that it was forever in danger of bursting out.

Barbara was sweating again under the heavy tweed. She hoped it didn't show. She itched, but she dared not scratch. Did she have the job or what? It sounded like it; and yet nothing definite had been said. She wished they would get up and go see the holy of holies or highest of the high or whatever they called him! . . . and get it over with. Would *he* have the final word . . . or was it Natalie Simon who would say yes or no?

"Barbara? Look, as far as I'm concerned, you're it. We'll of course have to get Millard's okay to make it a deal. . . . But before we go see him, there's just one thing . . ."

"Yes?" Here came the 'but.' But I'm too old. But I'm too inexperienced. But I'm too fat . . . too thin . . . too *something*.

"How do you feel about gays?"

"Gaze?" What *was* the woman talking about? Had she said *glaze*? Or what?

"Millard," Natalie said with pointed patience, "is gay. Does that bother you? Remember, you'll be with him all day and . . ."

Barbara began to laugh. *Gays*. Oh, for God's sake! "No, no, it doesn't bother me," she said. But, she added silently, let's get up and go *see* him before I stick permanently to this chair.

"Come on then," Natalie said and, with one smooth movement, was out of her chair and halfway through the

door. Barbara got up and surreptitiously plucked at her clothing. And then, hoping that she looked less uncertain than she felt, she followed. The secretary, who was very cute, gave her a big, friendly grin without pausing in her rapid-fire typing. Cute and young. She didn't look a day older than Jen. Of course, the glossy makeup gave her a different look, but still . . . What a difference. This little girl came every day to an office. She held down a job and apparently did what was expected of her. She was a responsible person. Whereas Jenny . . . did Jenny even know how to get herself breakfast? And what would Jenny say, how would she react, if her mother came home tonight and said, "Hi, kids, guess what? Mom has a job. Mom'll be going to *work* every day. On Madison Avenue!" Just the thought of it made her heart beat faster.

They marched along, down a long corridor, the walls hung with framed ads and huge blowups of cartoons, all the office doors open and spilling light out into the hall. Natalie walked rather rapidly, so that Barbara caught only tantalizing glimpses as they whizzed by. Stark modern with plants. Louis XVI—she *thought* it was Louis XVI—in fruitwood and satin. Bamboo and paper lanterns and Japanese prints. One was totally red: walls, ceiling, floor. She longed to stop and have a good look at each and every one.

And the outré snatches of overheard conversation: "Goddammit, Henry, when I say Benz, I mean Mercedes-Benz, not the goddam rice . . . !" "At twenty-five thousand dollars a page, they can run a picture of their founder's *cat*, for all of me . . ." "Well, Bernie, get your ass out to L. A., yesterday!" "So, she got off the bed, looked the cameraman straight in the eye and said—" And then they passed that door and she never heard the rest of it.

As they were nearing the end of the corridor, 10 or 11 pictures mounted on big orange cardboards suddenly came sailing out of a door and across the hall, followed by "bullshit!" and "crapola!" shouted in a loud baritone, followed by a young woman who knelt and scuttled about on her knees retrieving them. Natalie and Barbara halted, and the young woman looked directly up into Barbara's startled eyes, saying calmly, "I guess these weren't quite what he had in mind."

Natalie never paused. "Mr. Peter Marcus, our fearless leader," she explained to Barbara over one shoulder and kept right on going around the corner.

Barbara right behind her said, "Is it always so . . .?"

"So dead around here? Oh, no! It's pretty late in the afternoon, especially for copywriters. . . . This is the copy department; art is over there . . ." She gestured somewhere to the left. "Most of the troops have already adjourned to PJs to smooth their passage into the evening." With one hand, she made a quick drinking gesture. "Anyway, you won't get too many chuckles out of the copywriters. We're the quiet ones. We go to the art department for entertainment."

Barbara smiled to herself. If she called this "dead," then what in the world was considered lively? A full-scale recreation of the Battle of Bunker Hill? It would be *such* fun working here. To be part of this. In. To be in with these exciting, creative, glamorous people. Oh, the stories she'd have to tell! Secretly, she crossed the fingers on her right hand—even after all these years, she still remembered it was bad luck on the left—and voiced a silent plea. And immediately felt foolish and dumb.

They had gone only a few more steps when Natalie opened a door and leaned against it, gesturing Barbara in ahead of her. They were in a large anteroom, separated from a brightly lit kitchen by a long butcher-block counter. Metal industrial lamps hung low over blue denim couches. There were several blue-and-yellow-and-orange dhurrie rugs scattered about, and a long low table between the couches with glossy food magazines carefully spread out on it. Beyond was the working space: a no-nonsense blue-and-white kitchen with a quarry tile floor, a huge commercial-sized refrigerator with dull metal doors, miles and miles of butcher-block counters, and a big black Garland range. Barbara's mouth fairly watered. Right in the middle hunkered a huge pine trestle table with rush-seated wood stools shoved under it.

All the ad agency chatter was shut off in here. It was like suddenly being in somebody's home. From a corner of the kitchen came the familiar whirring sound of a food processor. Standing over it was an impeccable male figure,

tall and slim, standing almost at attention, feet neatly together. He was wearing pale chino pants and a matching shirt. A pristine white apron was wrapped tightly about him. He looked polished and put-together and squeaky-clean, humming along with a recording of Fred Astaire singing "Change Partners and Dance with Me." It was all calm and peaceful, like a scene from a magazine spread on "Favorite Kitchens I Have Known."

And then the hypnotic whirring stopped, followed almost instantly by "*Nom du nom! Encore* a screwup!" He turned suddenly and was looking directly at them. "*Sacre bleu, vert, jaune et brune!* Natalie, this brute of a food processor is unspeakable! It has decided to strike in the middle of a piña colada for which my mouth was watering and my soul yearning. Do tell me that Ms. Jones hasn't left yet . . . No, I knew it! She has departed . . . taking with her the only pair of hands in the place capable of fixing that . . . that . . . *thing*!

"I know *you're* helpless around machinery, Nat. But what about your friend? Have *you* the touch, dear lady?" He was not anything Barbara had expected: about 50 or so, hard to tell, a few fine lines in his tanned face, white short-cropped hair, deep-set eyes of a startling bright green below thick straight brows. His hands, which he waved about a lot, were large, capable, heavily veined, and muscular.

The chef. And here he was, asking her not to whip up a soufflé, not to sauté an eggplant or think up a new recipe for cream cheese . . . not any of the things she knew how to do but to fix the goddam food processor! When she was always so helpless around electrical things. She had felt this job so close. So close, she could almost touch it. And she *wanted* it. To work in this wonderful place, right in the thick of everything clever and creative, to come every day into midtown Manhattan, dressed for business, with a job to do—!

She stared back into his clear eyes and thought defiantly: well, to hell with it. "I'll see what I can do," she said, surprised at how certain her voice sounded, and stepped smartly into the kitchen, hoping that it was some-

thing very simple, very obvious. Hoping she even knew where to look.

The machine squatted there on the counter, low, round, green-tinted plastic, full of push buttons and switches, silent and menacing, like a modern malevolent spirit. It was a brand she had never heard of, much less seen. Well, all right. It was filled with froth and chunks of ice. Maybe the ice was too much for the motor? But the chef would know that, wouldn't he? Stalling, she leaned over and sniffed the contents. Ah, lovely. A drink redolent of rum and fruit.

From the door, Millard's voice: "You see? Fix it, and I will be able to treat you to a brand-new taste sensation." He was watching her every move. She took a deep breath and stared at the thing, as if she could make it speak. What would Mark look for? Well, as he was always telling her, you have to start from Point A. And Point A, she decided would have to be the plug.

The plug, when she traced it into a welter of outlets on the wall, was actually hanging loose in the socket. She could not believe her eyes. It couldn't be this easy! She pushed the plug in and the machine instantly began to whir and crunch away.

Millard zoomed across the room and stood behind her, chortling happily over the churning and sloshing. "Let's hope this is worth the trouble," he said. "And for you, dear lady, *brava*!"

A few minutes later, they were all seated on stools around the table, sipping on piña coladas that tasted not quite exactly like piña coladas. "What's *in* this?" Barbara said.

"Guess."

She sipped at the drink and slid it around on her tongue. It was delicious. There was pineapple plus something else . . . mango? papaya? "I can't tell," she admitted. "Although there seems to be some mango in there . . . papaya? a bit? And I think I taste some guava. But it couldn't be all those!"

Millard clapped loudly. "Oh, but it *could* be. I know it seems excessive, but our good client, Tropical Fruit Company, is trying to market a concoction we are calling Jun-

gle Juice . . . and *I* am trying my best to do something with it that will make it palatable . . . or at least potable. Do you think this will do? The Jungle Colada, or whatever?"

"Not fair to ask me," Barbara said truthfully. "At this time of the day, everything tends to taste terrific." As she said it, she thought maybe she should have praised his recipe. But he raised his glass in salute to her and sipped. "You have a good palate. This kicks like a mule, but somehow the rum and all those flavors—you think I should try vodka maybe? You have a lovely friend here, Nat. Who has no name, apparently. Hello, my dear." He held out a hand. "I'm Millard Littlefield."

"Barbara Valentine."

His grip was firm and warm. "Alas, we must drink up fast. Natalie has an applicant coming in any minute, don't you, Nat darling? And I shall have to suffer through another interview. I hate interviews, don't you, Barbara?"

He didn't know she was the applicant! What fun! Barbara smiled at him. "No, actually, I rather enjoy them," she said, taking another sip of the drink. Really, it was a very *nice* drink. It seeped into all the rough little corners and smoothed everything out. She was beginning to feel quite comfy and relaxed.

"Well, darling, and so would I if I were interviewing someone human—like you, for instance."

Natalie laughed. "Millard darling, you are, you are!" He gaped at her blankly for a half second or so and then he got it. The already thin lips tightened just a trifle. "How adorable of you, Nat darling, sneaking Mrs. Valentine in on me like that!"

"Not on purpose, Millard! Come on! Events just overtook introductions, that's all."

Barbara didn't even have to think about it. Automatically, she smiled and leaned forward in supplication, her hands held palms up before him. "My fault, Chef Littlefield. I told you I didn't mind interviews, but I was fibbing. Actually, I was awfully nervous, and it was heavenly of you to offer me a drink just when I needed it the most. I almost *forgot* I was the applicant. And it's so charming and comfortable here . . . Forgive?" She tilted her head just a

trifle . . . years of experience had taught her precisely the right moves to deal with an adult temper tantrum . . . and smiled just a bit more, just enough to bring out the dimple in her cheeks.

The cold little light left his eyes and he smiled back. "Forgive? How could I *not*, after such a charming appeal. But if there's one thing you'll learn about me, dear Mrs. Valentine, it's that I don't take to practical jokes." He looked into her eyes for another moment, then slid his glance sideways at Natalie Simon. "Do I, Nat?"

"Not unless *you* get to play them, Millard."

He laughed. "Quite so. So . . . Mrs. Valentine? I don't like tardiness either. Do you think you can be here nine o'clock *sharp*?"

Barbara stared at him; she could feel the smile exploding all over her face. A job! A real job! Wait until she told Mark! "Sure I can," she said. "When? I mean . . . what day? How soon? Now? How soon can I start?"

Millard got up and unwrapped the white apron. "Why, tomorrow, of course. And I hope to hell you can cook, because we have to come up with four brand-new, never-before-heard-of egg surprises by noon. Clients! Honestly!

"Well, ta," he said moving away as he spoke, collecting gear from a row of hooks on the wall: a beautifully tailored gray jacket, a silk foulard ascot, a small elegant suede shoulder bag. "I'm off to Lutece. Turn out the lights when you leave." And he was gone.

For several seconds, the two women looked at each other across the table, suddenly aware that they were strangers after the last half hour's illusion of intimacy. Then Natalie said, "So, that's it. Welcome aboard. What do you think?"

"Think! I think it's *wonderful*, of course."

"You're happy? You're excited?"

"Why, yes. Obviously . . . I . . ."

"Good. I sensed that you really wanted this job. To me, that's a lot more important than experience. It means you'll love it and give it your all."

"Oh, yes!" Barbara said, but her mind was racing. Her all? Just what did that mean? Now wasn't the time to ask,

but still . . . her family was used to good meals, to having the dry cleaning picked up, to finding all the little things they needed taken care of. She had a sudden picture of herself, racing like a madwoman against the crowd, pressing through throngs to get home on time. She thought of the others, the women who had one-by-one disappeared from the daytime neighborhood to take jobs. She had seen them, from time to time, hustling through D'Agostino's, brows furrowed, eyes far-off, throwing the quick, expensive cuts of meat into the basket. Or else sitting in Burger King with the kids, looking somehow forlorn under the bright lights and garish colors. That wouldn't be *her*, that she knew! But, then, what *would* be her? She had no image, no picture at all, except of herself hurrying, hurrying, hurrying.

"What is it?" Natalie was saying.

"Oh, sorry. Lost in thought. This all happened so quickly, I'm suddenly realizing that my life is going to change a lot. I don't really know even what to *expect*. This is my first job, do you know that? My first job—ever." If it hadn't been for the drinks, she knew, she'd never say a thing like that to her new boss. Her new boss! A little shiver went right down her spine. It was true, it was true. She had a job and a boss and . . . and . . . and everything.

"You'll love it," Natalie said. "God, I nearly went crazy when I had to stay home all the time . . . woops! Sorry, I forgot there for a minute. You've *been* staying home. And I must say, you don't look in the least bit crazy."

"Oh, but I loved it. Oh! And I'm *sure* I'll love this, too! You know," Barbara said, suddenly very serious, "I'm wondering what he put in those drinks. I can't seem to keep my mouth shut."

Natalie laughed, slid from her chair and got the container, swishing it happily. "Lots left," she announced. "What the hell, you're one of my kiddies now. You'll really spend most of your time in here—but you're now part of my little food family, and I say this drink will be *good* for you!" She poured for them both and took a healthy swig from her glass. "Barbara, I'd like to ask you something."

"Sure," Barbara said.

"You've stayed home with your kids all these years . . . I forget how many . . . fifteen? You've stayed home taking care of your home and your children. How did you keep from climbing the walls? No, really, I'd like to know. I only made it for fifteen *months* and I was ready to be committed. How do you *do* it? All of you?"

"I *loved* it," Barbara said, after a minute. "Everything I really enjoyed doing was right there. The children . . . I love babies. I love to cook . . . well, you know *that*, of course. And then, there was the house . . ."

"The house? You mean housework? Vacuuming and stuff? Yuck, as my daughter would say."

Barbara took another sip. "No. The house is . . . the house. It's a brownstone. We're renovating it. My husband is an architect and we've been redoing it for, oh I don't know, ten years, maybe twelve, maybe a hundred and twelve. It all blurs together, all the wallpaper samples and the paint samples and the mouldings . . ." She took another sip. "Come to think of it, maybe *that's* why I decided it was time to get a job . . . just bored with fixing the house forever. A house is an endless proposition, you know. Absolutely endless."

Natalie gave her a shrewd glance over the rim of the glass. "Yes, but so is a job. Twenty-five hours a day and weekends too, please."

"Really? Oh dear, I hadn't thought—"

"No, no, not you. Not yet. Me, is what I meant. When you were talking about it all blurring together, I knew exactly where you were coming from. I could see all the layouts and the comps and the memos for the past eight years, all running by me and all becoming one great mass of brown . . . something the color and texture of cold oatmeal, I'd say . . ." She paused to laugh and took another sip. "But still, I stay. And love it all." She sighed and glanced up. "Oh shit. Look at the time. They've all gone home and I wasn't there to say goodnight . . ." She smiled at Barbara. "My little food family. There's Martha J, Jeff, Debbie, Tommy Thoms, and Jake, although he's a group head with his own accounts. Still, he's part of the family . . . kind of a foster child. They always come by to say good-

night. Only I wasn't there tonight, so I missed them. Even Jake will have left by six-thirty . . ."

Barbara thought she sounded wistful.

Then she added, "Well, I'll just tell them all tomorrow that it was all your fault; let them be mad at you! No, no Barbara, I'm only kidding, of course I'm only kidding, nobody's going to be mad at anybody! Of course not!"

But Barbara was glad for a reason to leave. She had a feeling that she had had too much to drink. She could feel a headache beginning. "Six-thirty! That late!" she exclaimed, wondering if her voice was coming out as phony as it sounded to her. "I'd better get home and start dinner!"

Natalie carried her drink back to the office with her. Debbie had left the desk lamp on. A chilled bottle of Blanc de Blancs sat sweating on her desk, unopened, surrounded by half a dozen glasses. There were three messages. Barbara Valentine was a little bit looped, but very pleasantly. Several more strands of hair had loosened and she looked a bit crumpled, but in a womanly way. She'd get a cab immediately, Natalie was sure. She saw her to the elevator, still sipping idly at the sweet drink. Nice gal, she thought, she'll fit in very nicely and thank God Millard likes her. She handled *him* like a pro, God knows. Back in the office, she consulted her wristwatch. Six forty-two. Audrey would be busy making dinner by now. Melissa's choir practice wasn't over until 7:00 and Jerry was going to be late, 8:00 or 9:00 hadn't he said?

A good mother would get herself home by 7:00. But what the hell, she'd only be in the way . . . and the top message was from Carla Friedman at Channel 9; she'd been trying to get Carla for *weeks* . . . what the hell, half an hour more. She kicked off her pumps, leaned back in her chair, and reached out for the phone.

6 Her New Career

Barbara all but floated down to Madison Avenue. She walked out of the big lobby, saying to herself, "From now on, this is *my* building." The street lights were on and the sky was a dusky purple. The sidewalks were still crowded with people moving swiftly, purposefully to a Broadway show, dinner for two, a gallery opening: something wonderful and Manhattan-y.

Mark will meet me here, right here, in front of this building . . . *my* building . . . and I'll let him kiss me and people will see us and wonder who that lucky couple is, so much in love. And we'll go somewhere wonderful. She would have to find out what restaurants were in this neighborhood. Oh, it would be such fun, exploring on her lunch hour.

It gave her a feeling of physical pleasure to walk on Madison Avenue, pacing herself with all the others. But she stopped at the corner and again just looked around, enjoying the sensation of knowing that she was now a part of all this. Everyone she saw carried some sort of attaché case; she would have to get one her first free moment tomorrow. Tomorrow! Tomorrow, her first day at work as . . . as . . . damn! What *was* she anyway? Assistant to the chef, that's what she'd tell Mark and the kids. Assistant to the chef . . . but was the test kitchen chef in an ad agency called a *chef*? And did it matter? She had a *job*!

Barbara Valentine, wife, mother, and volunteer worker had a real job! Who cared what they called it.

Madison Avenue was chic and sleek, with boutiques, leather-goods stores, haberdasheries, and elegant jewelers . . . plus all the banks, of course. It seemed as if there was one on every corner.

But here on the side street as she turned the corner, it was a different scene. Here there were shops, too, but they were small, less pretentious, selling the practical gear of life. She walked slowly savoring every sight. Drugstores. Luncheonettes. Lingerie shops. A stationery store. All brightly lighted and doing a brisk business before closing. There were two women in the lingerie shop looking at pantyhose. The window of the coffee shop next door was cloudy with steam. Four or five people came out, each with a small brown-paper bag—something for the commuter train probably. The woman behind the cash register in the coffee shop would soon know her. She'd know Barbara after a week or two, because Barbara would be the gal from M & M who always came in early and ordered strong tea with an English muffin. Yes, in a week or two, this whole block would be part of her turf. It made her shiver with anticipation.

She had exactly 10 dollars and 16 cents in her purse. She hailed a cab, plopped herself in the back seat and announced "Brooklyn Heights." Normally, she poked her head in and asked sweetly if the driver would *mind* going across the bridge. But tonight she was not the same Barbara Valentine. No more tentative little housewife stuff for her! Hell, no!

The cabbie didn't object. He just went. And when they got to her corner, Orange and Hicks, and the fare was seven dollars, she tossed him the 10-dollar bill and said airily, "Keep the change!" La-de-da, she was a woman of independent means!

The outside light had not been turned on: the beautiful brass and etched glass carriage lamp of precisely the right period that Mark had sent her searching for, uptown and downtown, to antique stores and salvage yards, to lighting manufacturers and flea markets for months and months.

That perfect lamp, the lamp he would have no substitute for—and he never, ever, remembered to turn it on. She had been so excited when she finally found it and it passed muster. He had dogged the electrician's every step when it was hooked up. And then—it was so like Mark!—he was able to forget it completely.

The house was an ordinary brownstone much like dozens of others in Brooklyn Heights, where there had been a postwar building boom—the war in this case being the Civil War. Off-center front door at the top of a flight of stone steps: that was the parlor floor. Three more floors above and one below. Small garden in back, miniscule space in front, wrought-iron fence and gate, nothing spectacular in the way of detail—until you got inside, where the prosperous merchants of the 1800s had spent their profits on parqueted floors and marble fireplaces with tiled hearths, and elaborate plasterwork garlands and swags on the high ceilings. They had lavished money on brass fittings and stained glass and ornamental ironwork and woodwork. Ah, the good old days when raw material resources were cheap and labor was even cheaper.

Mark had found the cheapest labor of all: love. Barbara, in other words. Of course, every chance he got, he worked, too. It was just that . . . well, she was home all the time and he wasn't. Over the years, she had become quite expert. She stood quite still on the walk in front of her house and stared at it. Come to think of it, she could very easily have found a job refinishing fine furniture or restoring antiques or even advising about the post-Civil War and Victorian periods. Funny . . . it had never occurred to her, not even for one minute.

Backing up a bit, she craned to see through the parlor window. By tipping her head way back, she could see the tops of the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves that covered one wall and the gilt frame of the huge mirror that hung over the mantel. There was a light on in the room. So somebody was home. She went bounding up the steps, thinking, "This is the last time I go up these steps unemployed." It made her giggle. Oh, wait till they hear! She fumbled and fumbled with her key in the lock—dammit, you couldn't see a thing

up here without that light on—and then turned and leaned on the doorbell. Dammit, where was everyone? And then she saw her husband's familiar shape approaching in the wavery glass of the sidelight. Hurry up, Mark. He was always so quick and direct; tonight he seemed to be lazing his way down the hall.

He was frowning when he opened the door. "Where have you been? You're late!"

Barbara flung herself at him, hugging him fiercely: "I'm sorry, but, oh, Mark darling, I have the most—"

He pulled her into the tiny vestibule, saying in an irritated tone: "Where the hell have you *been*? Do you realize I've been here waiting for you, expecting you, since *four-thirty*? That's—" he consulted his watch with a flourish "—just about three hours."

"But, Mark," she insisted. "Listen, this is so important!"

Now a smile quirked at the corners of his mouth. He was still annoyed but curious. "Important?"

"Oh yes, Mark, listen. It was already four-thirty and I'd just about given up . . ."

"Come in, come in, sit down and tell me over a glass of wine. The whole world doesn't have to hear." His hand warm on her back where waist curved into derriere, he walked with her, guiding her into the front room. Then he turned her around and held her off at arm's length, grinning delightedly. "Don't tell me, Barbara, let me guess. You're all flushed and there's a certain gleam in your eye, which I seem to recognize. Well, well, well . . ."

"Am I flushed? Yes, I suppose I am. I feel all warm . . . maybe it was the drinks . . ."

"Drinks?" he frowned. "Should you be drinking?"

Something was awry. Barbara squinted up at him, shrugging out of the jacket and struggling with the boots. "What in the world do you *mean* 'should I be?' Why shouldn't I be drinking? Isn't that what people do to celebrate?"

His face changed suddenly, totally, and became completely flat, as did his voice. "You're not pregnant."

"Pregnant! *Pregnant*!! Oh my God, Mark, whatever put an idea like that into your head? What in hell would I want

to be *pregnant* for?" The idea tickled her, and she began to laugh. Men! She had made it very clear to him in six lengthy discussions that another child was out of the question. From what dimly lit corner of his brain did he dig out that notion?

Still laughing, holding her boots in one hand, she leaned over against him and held her face up to be kissed. "It's much better than that anyway!" she said. But he wouldn't kiss her.

"Well, what is it then?"

Triumphant, she crowed: "I have a job! A job, Mark! In an ad agency! I start tomorrow! Is that *fantastic*? I went out this morning saying it's now or never. I swore to myself that by the end of today I'd have a job! And it *happened*!" She chortled. "I still can't believe it! I start tomorrow . . . on Madison Avenue, Mark!"

Mark said, in a strange voice, "Which ad agency?"

"M & M! Isn't that funny . . . I'm not even sure what M & M stands for. They all just call it by its initials."

"M & M . . . oh."

"What . . . oh? Have you heard of it?"

He smiled a little. "Oh, really, Barbara, everyone's heard of Marcus and Morrisey."

"Then aren't you pleased that I've landed a job with a well-known agency?" She tilted her head and lightly, pursed her lips, but he was having none of her. Well, okay. She was late. Too bad. She could be late once a year. He could wait a few minutes for his dinner; God knows she had done her share of waiting for him through the years. "I'll cook something quick and delicious," she promised, heading for the kitchen.

His hand came out, digging into her arm so that it hurt. "I had something slow and delicious planned for about four-thirty this afternoon, lady . . ." His voice was light, almost mocking, but Barbara recognized the ice underneath. Something slow and delicious? . . . And then she knew.

It all came back at once: his hands on her, his eyes flicking over her, saying he'd meet her back home at 4:30. Their tryst! Oh, my God! And she'd completely forgotten!

She swallowed and smiled at him in her most winning manner. "The extra edition! And you're mad at me. Oh God, I'm sorry, honey. Forgive?"

"Don't be silly. Nothing to forgive. I canceled out the Worthington conference and I picked up a few goodies at Zabar's that are now melting and moldering on the table in our room . . . And I was contemplating calling the local cops, since I had no idea at all where the hell you were . . . and I had to send the kids out for pizza so they wouldn't starve to death . . . But other than that . . ."

Barbara gave him a look. She was sure he would be kidding. But he wasn't. "You're not kidding," she said, a bit taken aback.

"Of course I'm kidding!"

"You're mad!"

"I'm not mad and I *was* kidding. Except about the food. I spent a small fortune at Zabar's, and it really is waiting upstairs for our romantic moment."

"Why don't you go up and get it and we'll eat right here in the living room and watch the news . . . and then I can tell you all about my new job."

"But . . . I've set it all *out*, Barbara . . . wine glasses and everything . . ."

"Okay then, we'll eat up there. What's the matter, Mark?"

"Nothing."

"You have that funny look on your face. What *is* it?"

"*Nothing*, dammit. Don't try to analyze me; I've told you that a hundred times."

Barbara knew better than to pursue it when he was in this little mood of his. She'd wait until he'd had something to eat. She started up the stairs for the bedroom, with him right behind her, swaying her hips a bit. After a moment, he reached up and put a hand around the curve of one buttock and she could hear his little grunt of pleasure. Yes, give him a little promise and something in his stomach and he'd be purring like a great big pussy cat. A wave of warmth enveloped her. How well she knew him! It was so nice to have a secure, close marriage where you really understood each other. Not many had it this good, espe-

cially not after so many years. When they reached the top of the stairs, she turned impulsively to hug him. But he was still miffed and stood stiffly, suffering her embrace until with a little laugh, she let him go.

The Asti Spumante was a bit warm, and the butter curls a bit blobby. But the pâté was marvelous. Oh, how she loved to eat, loved the feel of food as she chewed it, loved the different textures, the tastes, the smells, the surprises, the excitement of the first bite, the orchestration of a great meal. Mark had bought all her favorite deli things: pâté, smoked salmon, a bit of beluga caviar, dill butter, a wedge of white-dusted Brie, a large chewy chunk of rich pumpernickel bread, as well as a crusty Sicilian loaf lavished with sesame seeds. He had set it all up so carefully—he had a really good eye for color and balance—so tastefully on the lacquered Chinese table they had found at a Parke-Bernet auction six years ago. Plain white china and the flatware with the fat clear lucite handles. Two white linen napkins. Lovely. The table sat in front of the little arched fireplace, two plump tub chairs cozily facing each other across it. A small fire still flickered fitfully in the fireplace. What a lot of trouble he'd gone to! It wasn't like him, really—this kind of romantic gesture. But who cared? He'd done it this time, and that's what counted.

Barbara sat right down and dug in, tucking a napkin into the neck of her blouse. She was *starving*. After four months of dieting and two more of watching every mouthful, of counting every calorie, all for the sake of finding a job, she was free, free, free! She had a job, she had really found one . . . and for one meal, at least, she could indulge herself! Licking her fingers of the tiny black beads of caviar, she grinned at her husband and said, "Yum, what a feast. You're wonderful. Did you have a feeling I'd find a job?"

He lowered himself into the facing chair with a plop, a bit sulky still—although he did accept a piece of pumpernickel thickly layered with butter and salmon. He chewed the whole mouthful carefully and completely before he answered her in a totally bored tone.

"Hell no, Barbara. You've been talking job for months.

And you never got one. Why should today have been any different?" He reached out and grabbed a slab of salmon, pushing it into his mouth all at once. "I thought you were planning to make a career out of job-hunting . . ." His eyes slid away from her quickly. "No. This little . . . banquet . . . was just a romantic whimsy on my part."

Why was he looking at her so slyly? As if he had a secret message? But phooey on his little secrets! She was bubbling with her excitement, it was running like champagne through her veins. "Well, *I* had a feeling. I really did. I *knew* this morning that I'd be a working woman by tonight. And I *am*! Oh, I can't believe it!" Here, she paused a moment. If she had known it this morning, why would she not believe it tonight? Who cared? She held her glass out for more wine and gulped it thirstily. "Oh, and Mark, it's a nifty-looking place, their office. You'd love it. Modern but warm, not all hard-edged and self-conscious! Oh, and the woman who hired me! You'd love her! She's so dynamic and . . . and . . . *executive*! And the man I'll be working with . . . *for* . . ."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute. Hold on. You're like a child, just keep talking without telling anything. First of all, what kind of job did you get? Receptionist?"

"Recep— Oh, Mark! Of course not! Much better!"

"You can't type. You can't do shorthand. You have no work experience. What kind of weirdo job did they talk you into?"

Barbara stared at him. What a rotten thing to say! What had gotten into him? She took another swallow of wine, tore a hunk off the end of the Sicilian bread. "*Weirdo*? What makes you say weirdo? Why would someone offer me a weirdo job, Mark?"

He leaned back in the chair, stretching his legs out straight in front of him—what they laughingly called his make-Mark-taller-routine, when they were having fun together. Funny, it didn't seem quite so cute this time. Why the hell should he want to be taller, for God's sake? She'd never said anything about it, God knows. But then, he'd been turned on when she had her hair colored! So who knew what was going on in his head.

"What the hell are you qualified for?" he inquired.

"I'm a college graduate. I'm smart. I've run quite a few fund-raisers . . . and made money with them!"

"Those!" He dismissed her hours and weeks and days and nights of labor with a little wave of his hand.

She pushed herself up from the chair and stood over him. She was angry, really angry with him. "Who was it," she asked in icy tones, "told me I was at the height of my powers on my thirty-ninth birthday?"

"Oh, Barbara, for Christ's sake!"

"Well? Did you or did you not mean that?"

"Of course I did! But that had nothing to do with getting a . . . a . . . *job*! A dumb job just for the sake of having a job, for Christ's sake!"

There was a long moment of silence, during which a piece of burning wood in the fireplace sighed and dropped with an audible *plop*.

Barbara's eyes were filling with tears, and she blinked as hard as she could to stem the flow. She would *not* cry.

"For your information," she informed him, "I do not have a job for the *sake*, as you so quaintly put it, of having a job. It's for my sake . . . to start me on a new career. Since my career as mother is nearly at an end."

Mark smiled up at her with maddening calm. "So what is this remarkable career-building position?"

"I'm assistant to the chef . . . yes, really. M & M has a *lot* of food accounts and their own test kitchen. There's a food processor—remind me to tell you the story of how I fixed the food processor, it's a scream!—and, oh yes, pita bread, and soybeans and a funny tropical drink and—" She stopped. He had thrown his head back and was roaring with laughter, stomping his feet on the floor and squeezing tears out of his eyes. She stared at him, feeling awkward and lumpen and stupid to be standing there staring at him while he laughed at her. She pictured how he would look with that plate of glistening, oily pink salmon dumped right over his head. Finally, choking a little bit, he brought himself under control.

"Barbara, for Christ's sake, you must be joking!"

"About what? It's a perfectly wonderful job, and they were damn glad to get me, too!"

"I don't believe it, I don't believe it! You got yourself a

job *cooking*! Cooking? No, I don't believe it. You could've stayed home and cooked, for Christ's sake! What are they paying you? Twenty thou? No? Then, let me tell you a little secret, sweetheart. It's going to cost *me* money for you to go to Madison Avenue and play at having a job. You'll spend more than you earn. Cooking! Couldn't you do any better than that? I knew it had to be something weirdo! Oh, Christ, Barbara, where was your head when you took that?"

He heaved himself up from the chair, shaking his head. "Never mind," he said in a totally different tone. He put an avuncular hand on her shoulder. "It'll be all right. You just call them in the morning and tell them to forget it, you made a mistake or you changed your mind."

Barbara looked at him in disbelief. Call them in the morning! Tell them she had made a *mistake*! Changed her *mind*! Who the hell did he think he was? Look at him, so self-satisfied, so smug among the crumbs and dregs of his heavy, expensive, self-indulgent supper. He had no notion at all of what she was about, what she was doing, what she was even talking about. She gave him a long, hard look, seeing suddenly a patch on his cheek he had missed shaving, that there was the beginning of a soft spread just above his belt, meaning he would soon be getting the bar bells out of the closet—*her* closet, in fact. And there he was, reaching down for yet another piece of bread and stuffing it into his mouth.

"You have butter on your chin," she said. "It's all greasy." Of course—fastidious Mark—he just scrabbled after a napkin and while he was checking himself in the mirror, she said casually: "I'm not calling anyone. I'm going to work in the morning."

He turned and looked at her as if she were six years old and had just said something utterly stupid. And then he switched mental gears. She watched it happen. The smile became slightly lopsided and his gaze softened and he reached out lazily to gather her close to him, pushing his hips into hers. "Never mind all that," he murmured, his cheek pressed against hers. "Come on to bed, Barbie doll. We're three hours behind schedule already."

To her surprise, she didn't want to. There he was, close to her, his body urgent and demanding—and normally she would have been right there with him, eager and impatient, her body responding automatically to his. Not this time. She tipped her head back and looked at him, and he might have been a stranger; she felt nothing.

Now he was running his hand up and down her back. In a minute, he would curve his hand around her buttocks and push her even closer against him. And then—normally—they would begin to undress each other, in their own familiar, well-loved routine.

But she did not want him . . . and she didn't know how to say "No" to him. Living with a man for 18 years, and she didn't know how to say, "No thanks, I don't want to."

When she heard the scrabble of a key in the front door downstairs, a great sense of relief flooded over her. "Mark! The kids!"

"Close the door," he muttered, intent upon unbuttoning her blouse, his eyes half closed. "They're old enough to get the idea."

"Mark!" Barbara pulled away from him, giving him her best lighthearted laugh. "I haven't seen them since this morning! We can't lock the door on them!" And, then, turning her head, she called: "Hi, kids! We're upstairs!"

Mark was furious. His face looked bland, but she could tell by his eyes. They fairly sparked. Never mind, she told herself. She'd take care of him later. If he was going to get so upset over her working, she'd have to do something . . .

Later, after the kids had gone up to bed, she'd better make sure to give him his extra edition . . . and make it good . . . and prove to him that nothing had really changed.

7 On the Street Where You Walk

Shoulder to shoulder with about three thousand other commuters, Jake Miller pushed through the main doors of the Port Authority Bus Terminal and exited onto the windblown corner of Eighth Avenue and 43rd Street. He took a deep breath and grinned, looking around for a minute before crossing the street. Yep, pure carbon monoxide; how sweet the air of the Big Apple! Let them say their worst, let them castigate Gotham on the basis of dirt, smut, smog, litter, and bad manners . . . to him it was still God's Perfect Place, the fabled Isle of Manhattan. How he loved this city; it just brought out the cliché in him every time! Briefly, he wondered why he had caved in so easily when Maureen picked East Brunswick, New Jersey, to live in. And then, as always, he answered his own question: never mind why, it had worked out perfectly. She was there and he was . . . oh gods in your various heavens, thank you for small favors . . . he was *here*. When it became necessary to work late, or whatever, why he just took his usual room in the Alden Hotel.

He was a creature of comfortable habit. They were all settled in East Brunswick, and he saw no reason to go to all the bother of packing up and moving—not when he had

all the freedom he wanted. Comfort, that was the thing. Like always getting his paper at Phillie's newsstand. A small thing, to be sure, but it made him feel comfortable. He always slept on the bus from New Jersey, and he always bought his *New York Times* from Phillie as soon as he got in.

Without more than a casual glance at the traffic light, he jaywalked. Phillie was perched as usual on his stool behind the counter of the green-painted shed, his sightless eyes hidden behind huge dark glasses, his hands as always busy with something—putting out Juicy Fruit or straightening the piles of *Wall Street Journals*. Jake tossed a quarter into the dish. He said nothing, but the blind man grinned, folded a *Times* dextrously and said, "Morning, Jake, how's it goin'?"

"Jesus, Phillie, how do you *do* it?" It was a ritual with them. "How do you know it's me and not any one of a thousand commuters?"

"It's all in the breathin', Jake. I can tell the way you breathe." Laughter.

"No. No fooling now, Phillie."

"Aw, come on Jake, you been buying your paper from me for nearly twenty years. I gotta recognize you by now!"

"I give up." This conversation occurred about once a week, and he had yet to get a straight answer. He took the *Times*, folded it neatly and tucked it under his arm. Thus armed, he felt he could now head east for Madison Avenue and the vagaries of that most unbusinesslike of all businesses, advertising.

This daily stop with Phillie pleased him. It was kind of a talisman, his first few minutes in town and already somebody was calling him by his first name. He liked that. Everywhere he went, he liked to be known, he was funny that way. He had his regular bus driver and his regular shoeshine and his regular barber, his regular salesman at Barney's and his regular restaurant and his regular bar with, of course, his regular barman, where he took everyone: Clients, salesmen, friends, an occasional underling, and especially his ladies. Ah his ladies, bless 'em . . . when was it, yesterday? he and Nattie had held their

weekly meeting of the Mutual Aid Society. . . . He grinned to himself as he felt that old familiar stirring in his loins. "Down, boy," he thought and laughed aloud. One thing about Nat, she sure knew all the right moves. They had a good thing going. In a lot of ways, she was more his wife than Maureen would ever be. And yet he had to admit that he had picked Maureen because she was the epitome of everything he thought he wanted in a wife. Maureen Hyler, super WASP, Tri-Delt, Junior League, Episcopalian, and now executive vice-president of June Jordan Cosmetics, your standard model all-American girl complete even to the requisite blond hair and blue eyes.

Speaking of which—! He stood stock still suddenly in the middle of the sidewalk, causing three young women in almost identical tweed suits to crash into him. He muttered something at them—normally he would have had a quip at the ready and would have gotten at least the phone number of the redhead in the middle by the time they reached Madison Avenue. But his eyes and his attention this morning were both riveted on the most exciting woman he'd seen in a long, long time. What was there about her that brought the sudden rush of blood up? She didn't have the body he usually thought of as his type: small and neat and compact—like Maureen, like Nat, like that little redhead who bumped into him just now, like a dozen others he could name but wouldn't.

She was almost statuesque: tall and rounded, with large breasts and broad shoulders, wide through the hips with legs that wouldn't quit. And his heart pounded at the sight of her. She stood staring into the window of a stationery shop, totally unaware of him. Was it her face? But from the profile, although it was a pretty face with regular features, there was nothing extraordinary about her looks. She wasn't even young, particularly, but she stood there holding her head high and smiling a little bit. She looked as if she owned the world. That must be it. He liked his women proud and frosty. But once he got them into bed, he wanted something altogether else. In fact, as he stood looking her over, noting the intricate coil of golden hair held by large tortoise shell pins at the tape of her neck, he had an

instant fantasy: of his arms around her soft body, letting all the pins out of that hair, letting it ripple down, over his hands, over her bare shoulders, over her breasts with their pink nipples, and . . . woops! hastily he lowered his paper. Unbelievable! Just looking at her and he had a hard-on. This one, he had to meet. In fact, he had an uncontrollable urge to get over there and grab her and take her right over to the Alden, right now, this minute, no introductions necessary.

She moved away from the window and started down the street. Half a block and they'd be at Fifth and then just one block more and he'd lose her. Unless of course he didn't go into work but spent the rest of the day following her around . . . or spent the rest of his *life* following her around, whichever came sooner. And then he took off after her. What a wonderful walk she had: easy, unaffected, with those long, smooth WASP strides that made her hips swivel so nicely from side to side, as if oiled with money. The WASP walk, he thought, the walk of a woman who'd grown up with plenty of money, plenty of everything, knowing she'd always get whatever she wanted.

Oh want *me*, want *me*, Jake thought, and that's the prayer of a skinny Jewish boy from the Bronx. And then he had to laugh—not that he slowed down any or took his eyes off her magnificent tush—because the last time he'd followed a girl, the result had been marriage, a mortgage, and a growing feeling that maybe a mistake had been made.

Well, it had seemed romantic at the time. He had walked into the Frosh Mixer—a social function he was positive ahead of time he was going to loathe and despise—and, before he'd had his first beer or sneered his first sneer, he spotted her across the room. Little Miss Perfect, just his type. Short blond curly hair, big round blue eyes, freckles, tiny tits, the works. She wore a wraparound skirt and a white blouse, of course she did. And no lipstick, of course not. Little Miss Clean and he knew exactly precisely, move by move, how he would mess her up and destroy that impenetrable air. He'd shove it into her nice and hard, she'd shriek with joy and delight, she'd roll that neat little

body from side to side, she'd writhe and wriggle, she'd *sweat*, goddammit, it would pour off her in rivers. It was a good thing he was still holding his raincoat and could drape it casually in front of the embarrassing bulge. Oh, how he'd love to march right over to her, shake her hand and oh so casually move it right to his erection! What the hell would she do with *that*? he wondered. Staring at her across the room sipping at her Coke, her body held neatly, her lips held tightly, her head held straight and erect on her throat, the thought was wildly amusing. Little Miss WASP, that's what she was. Just his type.

Apparently he was grinning to himself when her eyes happened to meet his. She looked startled, looked away, then glanced back and then—oh wonder of wonders!—she smiled back at him. He couldn't be mistaken, not even across the room. She *was* looking straight at him, their eyes *were* touching and she *was* smiling. He opened his mouth to form the words "Stay right there," when she panicked. She fled. Her eyes went wide, she blushed, and she turned suddenly out of the door on the other side of the hall before he could get to her.

Panting, miserable, he ran after her. Out into the moon-washed October night, looking wildly in every direction, panicked that she would have disappeared and he would never, never see her again. Mentally, he was apologizing to her for his filthy thoughts, for his ravaging of her in his head. And there she was, a full block away, almost at the Park, and he wouldn't even have known if the streetlight hadn't cast a golden halo around her cropped curls. He pounded down the street, making vows to Venus. Just let me catch up with her before she's gone forever. Just let me catch up to her and I promise, I swear I won't even try to kiss her before the third date. And then he was assailed with doubt. Was it her? What if he was chasing like a lunatic after some other blond. But no, the blue sweater, he could see the blue sweater. And into the Park he went, dodging the night strollers, out in full force on this beautiful Saturday evening.

All the way across Washington Square Park he followed her, past the old men playing chess, past the guitar players,

past the necking couples. He was gaining on her, although she ran fast for a little thing. And then, miracle of miracles, she stopped, She stopped! Pledging a sacrifice of three desserts to Aphrodite, he put on an extra spurt of speed. And then skidded to a stop. She had called the cops! There was one of New York's Finest, a veritable wall of blue serge behind which she was taking refuge. Oh Christ, she had heard him or seen him pounding after her and was scared. Something had to be done or he'd really lose her for good.

In seconds, it was in his head, full-fledged, the whole speech, the whole shtick in fact. He raced over to them, interrupting her midsentence. "Officer, Officer, I love this woman and I have been following her. Not a Jack the Ripper but a poor lovesick NYU freshman named Jacob I. Miller from the Grand Concourse, the Bronx, majoring in Musicology and minoring in Creative Writing and not at all a pervert or a criminal, and all I wanted to do was ask her to dance at the Frosh Mixer when she left the hall and I just had to follow her and . . ." turning with his best brilliant smile to look her right in the eye . . . "*would* you?"

At first, she registered amazement at this performance, then looked kind of blank, and then frowned a little and said, in a perfectly normal tone of voice: "Would I what?"

"Dance with me."

Another beat and then she began to laugh. He felt triumphant. He *knew* it would work. He wasn't much to look at, but he could talk! He could, in fact, talk his way into anything, and he was going to talk his way into her. Now he knew it for sure.

The cop was young and nice. He laughed, too, and said, "Well, I gotta admire your nerve, fella, but next time take it a little easy, why don't you?"

She let him walk her home, she even let him buy her a cup of coffee. "I don't really like dancing very much," she told him. She was charming, a French major from Maryland. . . . "I've always heard about the Village and when I found out NYU was right there, I decided this was where I wanted to go," she told him. Just like him, he thought.

He was wrong, of course, she was not just like him; but for a long time, it didn't matter. She was absolutely not like the girls on his block or the girls at Music and Art. They were all as sharp as tacks, wiseass girls, quick with the comeback and full of demands. Maureen Hyler was sweet and soft and always saying, "Whatever you want to do is fine, Jacob, you always have such interesting ideas." Exactly what he thought of himself. It was wonderful; she never put him down, she was so accepting; and she thought his Jewishness and redheadedness equally cute and almost equally exotic. Him cute! The skinzo his whole life, the one about whom they made all the funny comments: "Turn him sideways and he disappears," or "Anyone with an astigmatism can't see him at all" . . . stuff like that.

He knew he was no Adonis. Every morning when he shaved and had to look in the mirror, he could see the reality. Funny face with its short nose and merry eyes and that bright-red curly hair and those freckles: the whole Howdy Doody number. It wasn't fair, his outside didn't match the suave, sinuous, swarthy lover who lived inside. Early on, he'd learned to use his wit. And by the time he was 18, he knew that if he could get a girl, any girl at all, alone in a corner, he could charm her into or out of any damn thing he wanted. It worked with Maureen Hyler, too, of course it did. The day after graduation, they went to City Hall and did the dirty deed. And then, because after all he was dealing with Maureen, she found a Unitarian minister who would do a church thing for them and so they did that, too in her home town. Ah yes, she looked just like a picture of The Blond Bride; she could have posed for a magazine cover. Everyone thought he was so lucky. *He* thought he was so lucky. Maureen certainly thought he was so lucky. And then they went to bed . . .

And some people never learn, he thought now, watching the provocative swaying just ahead of him. Here he was, at his advanced age, he who surely ought to know better, following another blonde, ready to ask her for the next dance. Never mind why, he was determined to meet her. If she crossed the street or went into a building or anything,

he was just going to go after her, period. He was going to introduce himself. What the hell, the worst thing she could do was cut him dead. The next worst thing was she'd be a Black Belt in karate. And the best? Well the best would be unprintable in a family publication.

The truth of the matter was, he was getting too old to let this chance slip by. He was getting too old to let any chance, no matter how slight, no matter how silly, drift away. Come on, fella, he pep-talked himself, you're a Mad Ave exec earning big bucks, and you've picked up maybe six or seven thousand broads in your lifetime, some of them on this very street. So why not give it a try? She was luscious; she looked . . . edible. She was the blue-plate special, that's who she was. And Jake Miller was ready to chow down!

Well, he asked himself, which shall it be: Ploy One or Ploy Two. He could pretend they knew each other and just walk up and begin talking. "Hi there. Nice to see you again . . ." Then he'd have to be charmingly embarrassed. "Oh, you mean—? Oh I'm sorry, but not very sorry . . ." and then put the ball squarely in her court and wait for her to make him feel more comfortable about his faux pas. That worked pretty well most times. Women were flattered that you wanted to meet them badly enough to pretend you already knew them. But that was second choice, really. He much preferred that all-purpose, "I've had my eye on you for *blank* amount of time . . . May I (a) buy you a drink; (b) ask you your name; (c) have the next waltz; (d) walk along with you; or (e) all of the above; or, (f) none of the above." He was sure he could make her laugh. He could make anybody laugh. Make 'em laugh and they were yours.

He'd give it another half a block—they were almost at the Tex Am Building anyway—and then he'd make his move. So if she snubbed him, she snubbed him. What the hell. He had to try, he *had* to. Any woman who could give him an erection on 47th Street and Seventh Avenue at 8:37 in the morning on a Tuesday, after he'd had four hours of fucking with Natalie yesterday and four minutes with Maureen last night . . . well, that woman was some-

thing special. And at the very least, it would make a helluva story for the breakfast hour. Natalie would scream with laughter. And furthermore, she'd have something really funny to say about it; she always did. Ms. Mouth, he called her. Natalie would get a terrific charge out of the saga of middle-aged man following middle-aged blonde. Well, it was funny, wasn't it? And if life wasn't a joke, then it wasn't worth living. They'd probably make a game out of it. The next time they hopped into bed at the Alden, he'd say "Let's play Jake following Big Blonde all the way up Mad Avenue and then I catch you," and she'd get it right away.

The Tex Am Building was right beyond this corner. He hustled to catch up with the blonde, when to his amazement, she turned into the familiar revolving doors. The lobby was nearly empty—most people in the ad game didn't start showing up until 9:30 or so—so he had no trouble keeping her in view. She went into elevator number three and he was right behind her. What colossal luck! If she got off, he'd follow her and then he'd make his move. No problem, no problem at all.

8 The Girl of His Dreams

"*Natalie, I don't care what you're doing,* it can't be as important as what I have to tell you!"

"Oh shit, Jake!" Natalie shook her head to clear it and pushed the pile of annual report papers away, secretly relieved. How she hated that damned annual report! What time was it anyway? "What time is it? It's early, you nit. What in hell so important could have happened before nine o'clock? And I was just getting into the pita bread figures. Oh hell. You might as well sit down now that you're here—"

"Shut up, Nat."

She finally looked at him. He was posed in the doorway, all insouciance, one hand over his heart, in one of his favorite Fred Astaire poses. Oh hell, she thought. It's too early in the morning for a replay of *Top Hat*. Whenever Jake did his Fred Astaire shtick, it always meant she was in for a declaration of undying love. The last time, if she recalled correctly and she certainly did, the hand over the heart had been followed by a proposal of divorce and marriage. Who could really deal with that in the morning? "Oh really, Jake—"

"Natalie, I'm in love!"

"Now, wait a minute, Jake. We agreed—"

"She is a vision, a fantasy—the shiksa of my dreams!"

She? Natalie felt the stiffness come over her face, like a

mask, hiding everything. He was talking about someone else. Impossible! Who did he mean? What *was* he talking about?

"There I was, strolling down the avenue as I do every morning of my life, thinking about love and life and the best way to sell truck tires . . . and then I saw her!" He moved into the room, outlining a female body in the air with his hands. "Tall, Natalie, blond, regal, a goddess come to earth and what a tush! I immediately fell head over heels in love with her.

"Luckily she was going in my direction, so it was no trouble at all to follow her. I followed her, Nat, you wouldn't believe how I knocked people over so I could keep her in sight. She was a definite Bryn Mawr, Natalie, not for me, I knew she could never be for NYU me. And yet, and yet . . . I found myself thinking of different ways to introduce myself where she wouldn't slap my face or reject me. 'Excuse me, Ms., but did you drop a handkerchief?' 'Excuse me, Ms., would you like to share an umbrella? What, it isn't raining? Well, then, would you like to share a cheese Danish?' Real class staff, Nat!

"And then—!" He leaped into one of the chairs, still gesturing. He was really enjoying himself, Natalie thought acidly. *Really*! This sort of sophomoric stuff was very unbecoming! She shuffled her pile of papers in a meaningful way. "Will you be finished soon? I hope?"

"How can you cut me off? Am I not confiding in you, my oldest and dearest friend?"

"I'll buy the 'dearest' but I'll be grateful if that other word is never mentioned again in my presence."

But he didn't laugh; he didn't really hear her. He just kept going. "I couldn't believe it, Nat. Every corner, I was sure she'd turn off. But no, she just kept goin' my way. And then, and then! We came to the Tex Am Building, and my heart was about to break forever because now for sure I would lose her. Be still, my palpitating heart, I cried inside myself. And, miracle of miracles, she turned into Tex Am. Into *our* building, Nat! The gray flannel goddess actually signed in! I put my scribble right under hers. If she now disappeared in the elevator—! By dint of knocking over three old ladies, I managed to squeeze into

the same elevator. She smelled as delicious as she looked, Natty. She was—!"

"Finish this up, would you, Jake? It's getting boring, quite frankly." Yesterday, giggling like a couple of kids, they had had a lovely romp on one of the Alden Hotel's outsized beds. And he had said to her yet again, "*We* should have got married, Natty." And here he was, 24 hours later, rhapsodizing endlessly about God knows what secretary or whatever. Yeah, he was joking . . . was there ever a moment when Jake was not joking around? . . . But still. It was getting a bit excessive.

"Don't interrupt, Nat, it's not polite. And besides, I'm really rolling now . . . I stood in that elevator, holding my breath. It would be much too wonderful, much much too much, if she got off at my floor. But she did!" He jumped down from the chair and did a little soft shoe. "She got off on my floor and she looked first to the left and then to the right. . . . Aha I thought, here's my chance. 'Excuse me, Ms., but are you lost?' And then she turned and began to glide down the hall, right toward my office, Nat! Right toward my office! My heart was pounding like a thousand violins!

"So God was going to be good, after all. She would march on down the hall, she would stop at my door, turn toward me and beckon me to her. She would draw me in, shut the door behind us, rip off my clothes, and perform such delights upon my quivering body as to render me insensible, insensate, and incapable of writing about tires for at least five minutes or the rest of my life, whichever comes sooner.

"And she did! She paused at my office and she placed her hand upon the knob of my door. I broke into a heat rash on the spot!"

Now I get it, Nat thought. This is all just make-believe, one of his long, involved, endless shaggy-person fantasies with some horrible groaner of a pun for a punchline. All right, let him continue on his merry way. There was no help for it. When Jake decided to do a number, you had to let him finish. And . . . what? "What was the last thing you just said?" she demanded.

"I said she then shook her head, turned in the oppo-

site direction and disappeared somewhere in Millard's kitchen."

"In the kitchen!" A strange, sinking feeling clutched at her stomach.

Jake collapsed his lanky body into one of the basket chairs, bringing his fist to his brow and striking a pose of dejection. "The love of my life . . . disappeared, forever . . . and into a kitchen!"

"Jake, you nit!" Her voice echoed strangely in her ears. Barbara Valentine—of all the people! "Your goddess is none other than Millard's new assistant—a happily married woman, I might add, who prefers being called Mrs. to Ms., who I hired myself just yesterday afternoon, and if you mess it up with your shenanigans, it'll be on your head to deal with Millard and Creative Cohorts."

"She works here! Oh, my sweet adorable gods and godlings, my dreams have all come true! She's a real person, and she works right here and I can see her and charm her and show her that I'm America's Sweetheart under this tough exterior—and what did you say her name is?"

"I didn't. But if you must know, it's *Mrs.* Valentine. Barbara."

Jake flung himself out of the chair, grinning from ear to ear. He rubbed his hands together gleefully. "Perfect! Perfect! Barbara Valentine, the girl of my dreams! And she turns out to be the girl next door!" Ignoring her totally, he floated himself out, singing loudly, "How can I ignore the girl next door . . ."

"Jake!" In spite of herself, she was out of her chair and at the doorway. "Don't mess around with her! She just started! I don't want her scared off!"

"Don't worry!" His voice came floating back. "I'll be gentle!"

Debbie, busy with her nail polish, looked up quizzically. "What's with Mr. M this morning?"

Natalie looked after his retreating back and gave a little sigh. "I don't really know, Debbie," she said, "but my feeling is, you might as well eat his prune Danish this morning. I don't think he'll be in for breakfast, somehow."

She turned away quickly as, without warning, her eyes

filled. Of all the nonsense! What in the world was the matter with her? She and Jake had never made promises to each other.

Their Mutual Aid Society had started after she had come back to work . . . after Jake came and got her that day, falling to his knees in the hallway. She had happily come back to work at M & M—and happily come back to her daily camaraderie with Jake—lunch or a drink after work together. One evening, they had stopped for a drink as they very often did. There was nothing unusual about that day, or their mood. Their favorite bar was almost completely empty as usual, except for one mooning young couple tucked into a corner and oblivious to the world around them.

Jake took the stool next to hers and ordered her a vodka on the rocks without asking what she wanted. She recalled they had exchanged a few words about that. He asked her how she felt about being back—he'd asked her that same question every day since she started working again—and for the umpteenth time, she said, "I love it, Jake. You were right, Jake. You're a fucking genius, Jake. I don't know how I've managed my life without your guidance up to now, Jake." Then he laughed and said, "Just for that, you get to say what you want to drink this round" and leaned over to give her a kiss on the cheek. He was always kissing her and putting his arms around her . . . he always had . . . but this time, he said "Yum, yum," and left his lips there an extra moment. And a small chill ran down her spine.

Laughing a bit, she pulled back. "Watch that stuff, hot lips. I am a married lady with a baby and a reputation and a Mixmaster, so watch out."

He smiled at her, his eyes thoughtful as he sipped at his Jack Daniel's. He reached out for her hand, and held it tightly, caressing the back with his thumb. "Natalie?" he said, and again that little shiver chased over her shoulders. Natalie licked her lips, unable to take her eyes away from his pale laughing ones. She clung to his hand. "Yes, what?"

"A shiver just ran down my back—"

She stared at him, unable to think of anything to say.

She told herself, Pull your hand away, that's what's doing it, pull your hand away. But she didn't.

"Natalie? Stop playing dumb."

Pull your hand away, Natalie told herself, pull your hand away and pick up your purse, smile at the man sweetly and say good night. But she didn't. Without quite knowing how it was happening, she found herself leaning toward him as he leaned into her and they were kissing. At first, it was just the light pressure of his lips on hers, not so different from all their casual friendly kisses.

And then his tongue thrust into her mouth and she felt her lips part, soften, felt the breath catch in her throat. Wait a minute, she thought, wait a *minute*! But she was kissing him back and clinging to his hand as if it would keep her from falling. When he pulled away from her, she opened her eyes slowly, completely disoriented. It was almost a shock to see the familiar art-deco silver stripes at the back of the bar. She had, for a moment, forgotten where she was.

"Didn't I tell you to watch that stuff?" she asked shakily.

"I've *been* watching, Natalie, and I'll tell you what's going to happen next. We're going to get up and leave the Silver Streak and walk across the street, dodging whatever traffic there may be, and we're going to go into the Alden Hotel and take a room and take it from there."

"I keep telling you, I have a small child. And you, dear Jake, keep forgetting it."

With one gentle finger, he rubbed her cheek. His eyes were on her, steady and very serious. Natalie shook her head and he said very slowly, as if she were not quite bright. "Don't fight it, Nattie. I'll give you a dime and you'll go over there to the phone booth and call home and tell them you're working late. And then. . . ."

Later, she could not recall what she had said when she got Audrey—only that she had to fight to keep her voice from shaking. There was Jake, paying the bartender, moving casually, looking just the same as always. It nettled her. Here she was, agitated, shivering like a virgin schoolgirl, licking her dry lips, while her heart hammered in her chest. And he looked totally untouched. He said something to the

barkeep, who threw back his head and howled delightedly. Telling jokes! Being funny! While she could hardly think at all. She'd often wondered whether Jake ever stopped with the funny lines, for anything. Apparently not. For a moment, she thought of stopping the whole thing—it was ridiculous, wasn't it? They were *buddies*!—but then he had her by the arm and again there was that anticipatory little shiver across her shoulders. Since Melissa's birth, Jerry had come to her less and less. In fact, they had not made love in several weeks and when she tried to talk to him about it, he just denied there was any problem. His way was to say, "I'm human, that's all, not the great, perfect lover. I'm sorry—I'm only a human being." It wasn't as if he had ever been a passionate, greedy lover, ever; but it had been okay, it had been . . . well, maybe not enough, but okay. And she had been faithful to him, by George.

Until now. Until now, with Jake's arm tucked into hers, hustling her across the street and saying, "Remember, you're the one who hides behind the palm tree and I'm the one who mumbles at the desk clerk and signs Mr. and Mrs. Doe in an illegible scribble." Again with the jokes, she thought. She was getting angrier—and quieter—by the minute. And yet she kept right on walking, went up the stairs, through the revolving door, behind the potted palm—well, not really, but she waited off to the side, listening to the rather bad pianist playing *Stardust in* the cocktail lounge and wondering what in the world she was doing here. Oh hell, she knew, really, what she was doing here; she was going to get laid—at last! Thank God. But she couldn't help noticing that the desk clerk knew Jake well, that he had said, "Oh, hello there, Mr. Miller," with easy familiarity. How many times a week was that redheaded jokester in here with his lady friends? Was she just going to get added onto his list . . . Natalie Simon, number 13, good for a quickie after work. Wait until they got upstairs; she had plenty of questions for Mr. Jacob Miller, the desk clerk's buddy!

She never got to say a word. Jake closed the door. Gone was the lighthearted pal, and in his place was a passionate and eager man who licked at her lips and kissed her throat

hungrily as he pushed her clothes down. Without a word, stripped the skirt, half-slip and panty hose down around her hips.

"Your shoes, woman, your shoes," he insisted. Natalie kicked them off, her head spinning. In another moment, she was stripped of every piece of clothing, and Jake was flinging his clothes across the room. And then he laid her down on the bed, regarding her with a big smile.

"Looks delicious," he said. "I think I'll start with toes and work my way up for appetizers." And proceeded to do just that, to lick and kiss and suck at her body until she had become writhing, moaning, mindless—greedy for the feel of him inside her.

"Please, please," she whispered, and he drew himself up, knelt over her, and she felt him—large, stiff, hot—push into her with a jolt. With a sharp sensation that was almost pain, she exploded instantly in orgasm, screaming. And he never stopped moving, never stopped caressing, never stopped talking to her, moaning, "Yes, baby," and "Give it to me," and "That's the way, baby."

When she finally quieted, he whispered. "That's just the beginning." And they were there for three hours, and he never stopped making love to her. He held her close and kissed her deeply, he turned her away from him and caressed her breasts and belly when he took her, he led her to stand in front of the dresser so she would watch the two of them in the mirror.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Natalie registered amazement that two old friends who had hugged and kissed as sexlessly as two babies for so many years had suddenly turned into this panting, abandoned, wildly lustful pair. She smiled as she thought it, licked her lips, and moaned orders: "More! Yes, that . . . there, right there . . . Yes . . . yes . . ."

Oh God! She had been starving! And this was a feast of feelings. Jake was imaginative, inventive, eager to please her. When at last they drew apart and lay back on the sweat-soaked sheets and calmly looked at each other, Natalie took a deep breath and, smiling, said, "Thanks. I needed that!"

And he howled with laughter, saying, "Yeah, I noticed."

She was relieved that they could still joke. She was relieved that their basic friendship seemed to be unchanged by those last three hours. It had been wonderful, but she knew as she contemplated him, totally relaxed, like a rag doll, his eyes closed, a half-smile on his face, that if this never happened again, neither of them would be heartbroken.

Of course, it had happened again. And again and again, in fact. In fact, for some four or five years, it had become more or less a weekly event. "How come we didn't do this when we were both single?" she had asked him once, sleepily, rubbing his chest with affection. "Because now that we're married, we aren't getting any!" He laughed and she almost asked him, "What *is* it with you and Maureen?" but she didn't dare. Jake never talked about Maureen. Never. He mentioned her name, but nobody had ever met her or seen a picture of her or had any idea what she did out there in East Brunswick, New Jersey. Or, indeed, if Jake ever showed up at home. He was always available for a party or a late supper or the theater or drinks after work or, in fact, for these Mutual Aid Society meetings each week. Available, willing, eager, and seemingly free as a bird.

Never mind how he managed it; she didn't care. He was just what the doctor ordered. They would make eager, active love, and then they would have good talk. Some of her best ideas were thought up on the Alden Hotel's much laundered white sheets. Natalie knew that Jake Miller had saved her sanity, her marriage, and her life. He was the only other person in the world who knew what her marriage was really like. She could say to Jake, "Do you know what he did last night? He told me he had been hoping to make love but that I gave him 'that look' and he just lost interest! What is 'that look,' " she would demand. "I don't remember looking at him at *all*. He was sleeping when I left; he was gone when I came home; and I was on the phone with Peter Marcus when he got in. I don't think we even said hello—until he came in with that line of garbagio. Who does he think he's kidding? He hasn't come

near me in *weeks*! And you know what really tees me off, Jake? We go out to meet one of his clients for dinner and he's holding my hand and making goo-goo eyes at me all evening. I'm sure the client and his wife think we have the most romantic relationship since Pyramus and Thisbe . . .

"What do you care what they think?" Jake said.

"I don't know! It makes me furious, this pretense . . . this staged marriage!"

"So why don't you get out?"

"I don't know . . . guilt, maybe. I was the Other Woman, remember? It would kill Melissa. She's too young. And . . . well, it's not too bad. I do have you—" And she reached over to caress him.

"You only want me for my body, you bitch," Jake murmured, scooping her into his arms. Which is the way their conversations generally ended. Even now, with the fine edge off their passion, they could still turn each other on with a glance.

And now, that bastard was singing the praises of another woman . . . carrying on about somebody he was going to be able to see day after day in the office. She had told him that Barbara Valentine was happily married; but was she? Who knew? Would he really leave her and try to make it with Barbara Valentine? Was this the end of the Mutual Aid Society? And who the hell was she going to find to take his place, at the age of 40? Damn his eyes anyway, he couldn't do this to her. How dare he? They had something *special*, something unusual . . . he was always saying they should have married each other! How could he think that one day and the very next think it about someone else?

She was staring out of her window, seeing nothing, her fists clenched tightly. The bastard! Girl of his dreams? I'll kill him for this—

"Natalie! Excuse me! I'm sorry!"

Natalie jumped a little. Get yourself under control, she told herself, and turned slowly, a smile pasted upon her lips. "Yes, Debbie?"

"I'm sorry . . . I could see you were lost in thought—But Mr. Marcus just called . . ."

"Oh Lord, what crisis is happening?"

Debbie looked very uncomfortable. "He said, 'Send that *woman* in to me immediately.' "

"Oh dear. The *that woman* kind of crisis, is it?"

"But it's not Friday," Debbie protested. "He's *always* fired you on Fridays before this!"

Natalie laughed and patted the girl on her shoulder. "Don't worry Debbie, . . . but if I'm not back in ten minutes, send in the cops."

"Golly," Debbie said. "I don't know how you find it amusing."

"Loyal, lovely Debbie. Well, never mind. He'll never fire me. I'm the only one Papa Hasahni will talk to." She was smiling, but she wasted no time getting to Peter's office. When he referred to her as *that woman*, she was in big trouble . . . at least for the moment.

She turned into the outer office, gave a quick wave to Mary-Claire, whose tightened lips undoubtedly mirrored whatever ire her boss was expressing, and marched herself right in.

And of course, he was terribly busy on the telephone, swiveling his chair from side to side, back to the door, pretending he hadn't heard her walk in, just awfully casual and lighthearted.

"Oh my, yes, darling . . ." he was saying, "twenty-second spots and then I suggest . . . no, no, McCann-Erikson tried that and it failed *miserably* . . . The best thing is to blitz them just before Santa Claus Time . . ." He laughed merrily, in a way that let Natalie know he was aware of her presence, knew she was standing there waiting for him, and was damned if he was going to acknowledge her. Okay. She'd be patient . . . although it was a dreadful waste of time. But you had to let Peter set the tone and then work your way around it somehow.

She took a seat in one of the visitor's chairs. There were three of them, nice comfortable tub chairs on swivels, each with its own standing ashtray on the right. Upholstered in silver-gray, of course, the same color as the wall-to-wall carpeting and the watered silk wallcovering. Beautifully made, covered in velvet, deeply cushioned. Nevertheless, it

was very uncomfortable to sit in one of Peter's chairs because he had his desk—and himself, of course—placed on a platform. It was only a step or so above floor level, but it was more than enough to force you to crane up to meet his eyes and to make him seem to loom over you. Natalie found it laughable; he wasn't *that* short, for God's sake, and it seemed to her that he had quite enough machismo without resorting to tricks. Still, it worked. Every time. She sat there today, dreading the moment when he'd finish his conversation, get up from his silver-gray swivel chair, perch himself on the edge of his desk, and look down upon her, whereupon her heart would immediately begin to thump nervously. It was a damn good thing, she thought not for the first time, that Peter Marcus was cute, or she'd have hauled off and smacked him one, long ago. And then, of course, she'd be somewhere else struggling to get herself known and not at the very edge of a vice-presidency.

She sat back in the chair, forcing herself not to tap her foot or show any other sign of impatience. His casual air did not fool her for a moment. She was sure that he knew every move she was making. It was remarkable, the way he seemed to be able to see everything that was going on.

To pass the time, she gazed about the sanctum sanctorum. It was a beautiful office, restful and serene, all gray and silver and soft fabrics, just like the reception area, everything contemporary and expensive. One wall was literally covered with framed photographs of Peter Marcus with just about everyone you could name: movie stars, politicians, football players, musicians, even a famous racehorse. Funny old Peter, even in pictures he couldn't bear to be alone. She did wish that he would get the hell off the phone, however, and let her get back to work.

As if reading her mind, he abruptly hung up and without turning to face her, said in metallic tones: "If it was Friday, I'd fire you."

"Peter! Darling! I'm sorry! I don't know what I've done, but whatever it is, I assure you, I didn't mean it."

There was a moment of frosty silence. Then he swiveled around, leaned forward over the huge expanse of desk, his hands folded together, impaling her with his gaze.

"Who is president of this company, might I inquire?"

"Oh Peter—!"

"Excuse me, Natalie, I believe I asked you a question."

"Peter, for the love of—"

"Will you or will you not answer my query?"

She sighed inwardly. Okay. I'll play. "Peter, darling, not only are you president of this company but as far as I know you are also president of the world."

"Don't try to flatter me." He didn't crack a smile.

Oh dear. Worse than usual. How to get him to relax? "Peter. I'm not flattering you. Come on. It's me, Nattie darling, remember?" She smiled up at him, thinking once more how hateful it was of him to have put everyone in the position of supplicant. On an impulse, she stood up. "Peter, you told Debbie you wanted to see me right away. Here I am. Tell me what the problem is and let's see how we can work it out."

"I doubt we can."

"Oh, I'm sure we can think of something . . ." She paced back and forth a little, eyeing him. If only he'd give her a hint what it was. Had Nature Boy gone to someone else? Was he constipated? Did the stock market go down? Had his mother called him from Florida to berate him for not calling *her* enough? With Peter, you never knew what would set off a mood. "Come on, Peter dear, we can't do a *thing*, negative *or* positive, unless you tell me what's wrong!"

"My authority has been seriously undermined!"

"But Peter, what—"

"Sit down, Natalie, Christ's sake, I can't stand it when people stand over me!"

Stand over him . . . stand *over* him? When he was always ensconced on that damned dais, like King Shit himself!? Natalie peered up at him, her mouth opening and closing. What the hell could you *say* to something so off-the-wall? She made little soothing noises and took her seat again.

"Now then," Peter continued. "I have a question for you."

"Yes, Peter." The tone meek and demure.

"Am I president of this agency?"

"Yes, Peter." Submissive as hell. "You are president of this agency."

"Have I the final say on hiring?"

"Well, of course. Whenever you want it."

"Then why has a new person, a female person, appeared in my agency . . . and I don't even know her name?"

"Peter! You were sent the usual memo with all the particulars!"

"Well, I never got it. And besides, you *know* I like to check everyone out. It's not as if we were one of the giants . . . I mean, this isn't J. Walter Thompson or Ted Bates or one of those places where you can get lost on a Tuesday and nobody finds you until 1987. We're intimate here, we're small, we're . . . cozy. We're a *team*! Each member must fit—"

"Peter!" Natalie protested. She popped up out of the chair again, agitated. "The last time I sent you a person for final approval—it was the sainted Debbie, I believe—you sent *me* a three-page memo explaining how the president of this agency is much too busy finding, getting, and keeping new accounts—in order to keep the staff in salaries—to see every little clerk and serf. You ended this work of art by asking us group heads 'to kindly refrain from wasting my time in this manner, forever and ever or until I announce a change of policy, whichever comes sooner.' "

Her imitation of his voice, with its slightly British-*y* overtones, was good, she knew that. She watched as the lean face mirrored several fleeting emotions: surprise, then irritation, and finally, to her relief, amusement.

"God, Nattie, did I write that? Did I really? Aren't you the clever girl to remember what the boss wrote in a memo so many months ago!"

Now he was smiling and then tension had gone out of his body. Now he pushed his chair back and stood up, coming to the front of the desk to perch on its edge. Now things were back to normal. She felt a trickle of sweat run down the side of her body. Sometimes, dealing with Peter Marcus in a mood was plain hard work.

She grinned up at him. "Still want to know the identity of the female person?"

He waved the thought away as if it had never been of the least importance. "No, no . . . never mind."

"Then perhaps now," Natalie said, in her gentlest voice, "you will tell me what's *really* bothering you."

He gazed down at her, smiling a little. "Oh, Nattie darling, you *are* my best girl after all. You always understand me. I wonder why we never—"

Natalie laughed. When Peter first came back from Israel and was working at M & M—before his father died—he had made an obligatory pass at every woman in the place. Including her. She had never made a head count, but apparently she was one of the few who had resisted. Well, he was charming, in a foxlike way, she supposed, and he could be witty. But she found him more and more to be just too mercurial and self-centered . . . and besides, first he was the boss's son and then, heaven help us, he was the boss. She was very glad she had resisted his rather aggressive blandishments. It put her at a distinct advantage: she was one of the few women around who could be his friend.

"Come on, Peter," she said. "That's all water over the bridge now."

"It's Nature Boy," he said.

"Nature Boy! But, my Lord, Peter, we have *months* to work on that! And it's only been ten days, you know, since they asked us to submit a campaign."

"But I heard on the street that BBDO already has a honey of an idea. Jim Charlton over there, they say, is walking around with a smug smile all over his body. We have to get it, Nattie! We *have* to!" Blood rose in his face. "I *want* it! *We're* the bright new food agency . . . aren't we? Well? Aren't we? We should have it! Look what we've done for pita bread! Nobody ever *heard* of it before M & M got the account. Now it's everywhere . . . Zabar's, E.A.T., not to mention every silly supermarket . . . Soon they'll be eating it in Texas with their chili and in Boston with their beans . . . And Disco Din-Din . . . and—"

"Whoa, Peter . . . take it easy." Now was the moment to climb up on the platform and pat his hand. She did so, saying, "Don't you see, that's why I hired that woman so quickly. She's Millard's new assistant and guess what, she's

an expert with Arab food. And guess what else? I've been thinking, we keep selling pita bread with whatever, but how about marketing Near Eastern foods? I think the world is ready for tabbouleh and for falafel . . . oh, Peter, and you lived in the Near East and you can talk to the Hasahnis all about it. And leave Nature Boy to Millard and Barbara Valentine and me."

He twinkled at her. "Oh, Nattie, you *are* a blessing. I feel a lot better. I'm sure you'll come up with something wonderful for Nature Boy. I can't think *why* I let gossip upset me so. Now I know I'll be seeing your new campaign ideas next week . . . oh terrific. What'd you say her name was?"

"Barbara Valentine," Natalie said absently, her heart sinking. He seemed to be prattling, but she knew from long experience that he would be waiting, one week from today exactly, to see her new campaign ideas on Nature Boy. She would have to work her butt off, not to mention all the kiddies. She did not look forward to the moans and groans when she announced, "It's nights and weekends once again!"

"I want to meet her," Peter said.

"Sure. Let's go now. You'll love her. She's very bright, and I'm sure she knows everything about health food that Millard doesn't." Abruptly, she stopped talking, as her eye was caught by her name on a typed memo lying on the desk. She slid her eyes sideways. Yes, that was it, all right. The memo. TO: Peter Marcus, President and Creative Director. FROM: Natalie Simon, Group Head. RE: Barbara Valentine, new employee, food assistant. And there were Peter's little red checkmarks all over it. So, it had not only arrived but he had read it. Carefully. Then what was all that about anyway? Why lie to her? What was it all in aid of? She opened her mouth to say, "See here, Peter, you *did* get my memo," and then decided no.

By the time they were hurrying down the hall—Peter always looked as if he were late to everything—she had pushed it out of her thoughts.

At Home

Outside Natalie's office window, the sun was turning red, sending splinters of blood-tinged light across her office, reflections from the windows in the building opposite.

She was at her desk, bent over a paper upon which she had lettered boldly: HEALTH FOOD IDEAS and which was followed by doodles of butterflies, question marks, ornate capital Ms, houses with smoke rising from the chimneys . . . but no ideas. She was trying to make her brain work on health food and it simply wouldn't. It kept wanting to think about that memo on Peter's desk. Why had he lied to her? And about something so trivial! She wrote down TOFU and then muttered a curse. Tofu was Oriental, not health. She crossed it out and put down GRAINS, SEEDS, BEANS. God, how boring. FERTILIZED EGGS. Oh shit, were they going to get into trouble with their own egg people? Were they going to scream and yell? She wrote down VITAMINS. Oh hell, that wasn't food, so she crossed that off, too.

And then a shaft of orangy light glowed across one corner of the page. Good. Just about 5:00. Recess time. She'd have to take this home with her; maybe discuss it with Jerry. Jerry was always good for six or seven really workable ideas. A shame, really, that he'd left advertising so completely. He'd be making a bloody fortune by now. But he loved his medical writing; said it let him sleep well at night to think he was "doing good for the world rather than selling the world a bill of goods." Come to think of it, he might even *know* something about health food. He was

in the health field, wasn't he? He was always reading those damn journals . . . anytime she wanted to talk to him, his nose was deep into some multisyllabic tome. Would he—

"Ready?" Debbie stuck her head around the door.

"Are you kidding?"

"Okay. Here it comes." And she walked into the room, carrying a big tray that held two bottles of wine—one red, one white—a dozen glasses, and a big bowl of corn chips, which she set down on the coffee table.

"Do you want white or red?"

"Oh Lord, I don't care. White. Is it chilled? Yes, okay. White. And a lot of it, please, Debbie dearest. What a day!" Gratefully, she accepted a chilled glass and took a large gulp. "You know what Millard is going to say if he sees a bowl of chips, don't you?"

Debbie giggled. "Oh sure. He'll say, 'Betrayed, stabbed in the back, and humiliated by the plebian tastes of this group of low-lives.' Or something like that!" She poured herself some red, muttering, "just half a glass." Debbie always told herself she was taking just half a glass—which she then proceeded to half refill several more times.

"Oh thank heavens, it's here!" Jake sailed in, pinching Debbie on the cheek and making her blush.

"It's always here," Natalie said with some asperity. "Nightly entertainment, 20 girls 20, no cover, no minimum."

"Oh yeah? Well, the joint was shut up tight as a drum last night. *Nada, neinte,* nothin'. I had to go to the Silver Streak and tell my troubles to the bartender!"

"Oh yes, I forgot. Last night, I was researching funny piña coladas with Millard and Barbara. Didn't everyone come by, Debbie?"

"No, ma'am. When you're not here, nobody comes."

"Good."

A moment later, Jeff strolled in, saying "Hi, sport," to Debbie, who once again turned rosy. "How's your love life?"

"Oh Jeff!"

"No, really, those guys out in Bensonhurst must go out of their minds when they see a class act like you."

"Oh Jeff!" Debbie was obviously beside herself with de-

light. She fluttered about the wine glasses, unable to decide what to do as he turned away.

He's already forgotten she exists, Natalie thought. He turned on the charm whenever it occurred to him to do so; and then arbitrarily turned it right off. She couldn't figure him. What was he after? He was certainly bright enough and clever enough. He'd be a group head somewhere in a year or two, young as he was. He wrote well and of course, there was his face. You couldn't get away from that clean-cut, preppy, honest, decent look; it disarmed and charmed everyone. Did things come to him too easily perhaps?

And of course, as soon as Martha J strutted in on a pair of ridiculously high heels, his entire attention was on her. She was a tough act to beat. Today it was a cherry-red jumpsuit and a fox chubby, and immediately every woman in the vicinity looked dowdy. Natalie glanced down at her own damn good ultrasuede shirtwaist—good for 20 or 30 years and very damn chic to boot—and sighed. Even Halston couldn't compete with a cherry-red jumpsuit on a size-three body.

"Hey, look at *that*, would you!" Jeff's tone was light and airy; but his eyes glittered in a way Natalie recognized. And he went quickly to get Martha J a glass of wine, which she held and twirled in her elegant long fingers but never lifted to her lips.

"How come you never remember I don't drink, Jeff-er-ee, when you're so good at details?"

"What does that mean?" It never failed; Martha J made him very nervous. He was smooth as silk with every other woman, but when he began to have dealings with her, he would bite his lips, tap his fingers, change position.

"I mean, you're able to take out Veronica from the eighth floor at six P.M., get her on the train at eight, and then get back here to pick up Tommy Thoms's secretary by eight-fifteen . . . oh yeah, Jeff-er-ee, the word's out on you!" She laughed gaily, Jeff flushed and glanced over at Natalie.

"Don't listen to her, boss, I only took Veronica out for a drink because she was crying over some guy who had dumped her."

"Do I care what you do with your personal life, Jeff?"

Natalie kept her voice dry. "Just so long as it goes on *outside* the group . . ." She smiled at him, sweetly.

"Yeah, Jeffrey, think chicken from nine to five and *then* you can switch to chicks! . . ." Martha J laughed again.

"You're fired!" Jake hooted. "That pun was socially unacceptable. However, hello, Martha J my darling." He took her hand and, instead of kissing it, turned his hand so that he was kissing the back of his own.

"Oh wow, Massa Jake, and what year before Christ did *that* routine come from?"

"Never you mind, young woman. You're not going to drink that so why don't you give it to me?" And he deftly took the glass of wine from her hand, gulping at it. "What a day! I'm glad it's over." He looked around, peering at each of them, then added: "It *is* over, isn't it? I mean, nobody's going to ask me to write a headline or anything, are they?"

"No, Jake," Natalie said, "we're all going to be our wonderful, droll, adorable, witty selves. *Light* somewhere, will you?" Even when he thought he was standing still he was always in motion, if it was only his eyes. "Of course," she added, with a smile, "it would be wonderful if someone would get drunk and give me the winning idea for Nature Boy. I seem only to be able to think junk food."

"I've got it!" Jake announced. "Wish no further. Here's your winning idea. Three teenyboppers, with blue jeans and no tops, all looking over their shoulders and wiggling their cute little pubescent arses, saying, Nature Boy, we *love* you!"

They all yelled *boo*! at him. Once again, Natalie wondered: had Jake *always* made so many sexually tinged comments . . . lately it seemed like he was doing it every other minute.

"You," she told him, eyeing him carefully, "are a dirty old man."

He started to give her a wise answer—she knew it would be wiseass by the look of delighted anticipation on his face—when suddenly his expression changed totally. The only word she could think of for it was *fatuous*. And now he stood still, staring at the doorway. Even before she turned to look, she knew damn well what it was and felt

that heavy *thunk* hit her in the solar plexus. Oh shit, Was she going to be sorry she'd ever hired the damn woman? Jake was always waxing poetic about this pair of tits or that wonderful rear end, and that was annoying, especially if they were on their way to the Alden. But *this* . . . I mean, she said to herself, just *look* at him, he's gawking at her like a smitten pimply-faced jerk.

And it seemed as if Barbara Valentine was very aware of his worship. She hesitated by the door, colored prettily and said, "Hi again, Jake. Hello, Natalie. Hi, everybody . . ."

"Then you know everyone?" Natalie said.

"Well, Millard took me around and introduced me to thirty or forty carefully chosen people . . ." She turned and gave the chef a big grin as he walked in. Obviously they were hitting it off. "I'm not sure of all the names, but yes, I've seen all the faces."

Brandishing a largish brown crockery bowl, Millard bowed to the assemblage, peered over at the bowl on the coffee table and announced: "Oh, Natalie, tacky tacky." At which, of course, she and Debbie just broke up. " Get those . . . those . . . greasy kid-stuff *things* off the table, someone," said Millard. "Mrs. Valentine has made for us a delectable baba ganooj and with it, we shall of course, nibble on pita . . ." Barbara held out a basket. Everyone applauded, and a voice behind them at the doorway said: "Oh, bravo. That's the spirit. I've had to go and argue with the cigarette people *again* today . . . it's not right to have competitive brands in the machine. It ought to be only *ours*."

There was a chorus of "Oh, *Tommy*!" It was one of his pet hobby horses, but none of the smokers in the agency—and that included Peter Marcus—would buy it. None of them liked the client's brand; none, of course, but Tommy Thoms.

"Come on in, Tommy," Jake drawled, "and let me give you a short, succinct lecture on the workings of the capitalistic system under which we all live and work and make piles of money. See, it's all got to do with a wonderful idea called competition, Tommy, and with a free market, and stuff like that."

"Never mind, Jake, I'll just have a glass of the grape, if

you don't mind. I know better than to expect understanding from *this* group of hippies."

Nevertheless, there was a grin on the round moon face with its perfectly round glasses, its little round nose and round dimple centered in the round chin. Tommy Thoms was not bad-looking but whenever she looked at him, Natalie had the strange feeling that he had gotten stuck in time as a Yale frosh. He looked pink-skinned and never showed a 5:00 o'clock shadow. One evening, having had three drinks, she rubbed her hand on his cheek and she was wrong. It felt like sandpaper—just like any other man's. And his eyes had glinted—just like any other man's. He just *looked* so preadolescent, or maybe it was the way he talked.

He took a chair near Jake and made appreciative noises at the bowl of baba ganooj. Martha J hooted as he leaned over to grab a piece of pita bread. "Watch out, Millard, that stuff is about to disappear. Won't *any* of us get a taste once Tommy starts to eat!"

He held out half a bread loaded with eggplant dip as if in offering. "Golly, Martha J, I don't mean—well, here—I mean—well hell, what do *you* care? You never eat anyway!"

"Oh yes I do, Tommy. But only soul food . . . hog maws and chitlins, and stuff like that. *Real* food." She leaned back against the bookcase, all long legs and elegance, her dark eyes flashing with amusement, perhaps; or perhaps, Natalie thought, a bit of malice. Tommy was not Martha J's favorite person. She probably had him taped perfectly—he could never be perfectly comfortable in the company of any brown-skinned person; he had quite enough problems with the Hasahnis—and it only made her come on with her darkie shtick. Since she had been born and raised in Paterson, New Jersey, her Southern drawl could be nothing but a major put-on.

Lazily, Natalie decided she'd help him out. "Listen, kiddies," she said loudly, "I have to tell you that Barbara Valentine, our newest infant, suffered trial by fire this morning and came through like nobody's business!"

Dutifully all heads turned to Barbara and over Jake's

face there spread a lopsided boyish grin that widened into a smile that couldn't be beat for insipidity, stupidity, and general infatuation. Oh, really, Jake! she thought. She was set to stick her tongue out at him, but he wouldn't meet her eyes; indeed, his gaze never wavered from Barbara Valentine's flushed and sparkling face.

The woman looked lovely, there was no way around it. She . . . *radiated*, that was the word. She was obviously enjoying herself tremendously. Well, that was fine, but did excitement have to make her skin look quite so dewy? And it wasn't fair that some women could have wisps of hair escaping from their combs and they became beautiful tendrils, whereas other women looked like they had wisps of hair escaping from the combs and hadn't had time to fix it up. Without thinking, Natalie patted her own short curls.

"Yes," she continued, "Barbara was faced suddenly this morning with Peter in a Major Mood."

"Oh my *gawd*!" That was Martha J, but they were all murmuring their solicitude. There wasn't a person in the room who had not, at least once, had to deal with Peter in a Major Mood. They all knew how irrational he became.

"But wait a minute, wait a minute." Natalie held up a hand. "That poor man never had a chance. I didn't even have to tell her . . ."

"Well, Barbara took one look at him," Jake interrupted, "and recognized what she calls a Super Snit when her husband does it. Something about a tightness around the jaw, a muscle twitching in the cheek and a clenching of the fists. So she just did what she does when her little hubby pulls this on her—"

"She *did*! In front of Millard?" Jeff said. They all broke up.

"Wait a minute," Natalie called. "How come you know all about it? It just happened this morning."

"Well, Jake dropped in for lunch today," Barbara said. "We'd just finished three new quiches, so it was a good thing. We made him taste them all . . ." She gave Natalie a big smile. "It wasn't quite as much fun as testing those piña coladas, but we did discover that the typical American taste—"

"That's me!" Jake announced, beating himself on the chest.

"—Will never go for black-olives-and-Roquefort-cheese quiche."

"Well, that sounds good to *me*," Tommy said. "And there's a rumor that the olive producers of Spain are looking for a new agency . . ."

"Oh, Tommy!" It was a general groan.

"And what if the cheese of France decide to leave—"

"Tommy! Stop it!" Natalie was laughing. "Come back to reality! Eat!"

"Anyway," Millard was saying, "Mrs. Valentine charmed poor Peter until he was a mound of quivering Jell-O . . . oh dear me, no, I didn't mean that . . . of aspic, perhaps, or madrilene." He patted Barbara on her shoulder. "In any case, she calmed him right down."

"Yes, Barbara," Natalie said. "Where in the world did you learn so much about the uses of lentils, for heaven's sake? And how did you know that lentils were—or is it 'was'—the way to Peter Marcus's heart?"

Barbara smiled. "I only know that when a man comes into a room with blood in his eye, you have to gaze deeply at him and start talking . . . about any damn thing at all . . . and ask his opinion every few seconds. My eye happened to be caught by the bag of lentils your Arab bakers had sent over and . . ."

"And," Jake ended, waving his wineglass, "the rest is history!" Now, for the first time since he'd entered the room, he faced Natalie, looking her straight in the eye. "I hope you were taking notes, Natalie dearest. Especially the part about asking his opinion . . ."

The smile felt stiff on her lips. "I hear everything," she said and paused for a beat or two. "And when I want your opinion, Jake . . . I'll ask for it!"

It was Jeff who laughed the loudest and when Natalie gave him a grateful glance, he winked. It was amazing, the effect that little wink had on her heartbeat. It was terribly suggestive—a complete surprise. And she'd never before noticed the little scar that notched one thick eyebrow.

"Jesus, I really asked for *that* one!" Jake laughed. He

gave her one of their old conspiratorial looks. See, Natalie, she said to herself, you are a crazy woman. Imagining that Jake could care for anybody else! They went back a long way. Come *on*, people don't change overnight. He was always saying that big blondes were his kind of strudel. Barbara was just a living joke as far as he was concerned, that's all.

At 6:15, Debbie took the last dregs of the eggplant to the refrigerator in the kitchen. The bottles of wine were empty, upended in Natalie's wastebasket. As she and Barbara walked through the empty corridors to the elevators, she remarked: "God only knows what the janitors here make of my wastebasket. All the snack trash ends up in it, and there's an empty bottle or two just about every working night if we're all working on something." She slipped a glance at Barbara. "Jake's always saying we ought to tip a few chairs over and scatter papers and pillows all over the room to make it really interesting for the cleaning women."

Barbara laughed in a very natural manner. The mention of Jake's name didn't seem to affect her one way or the other. And when she turned to Natalie, saying, "Oh, Natalie, this is the most fun I've had in years! What a place! And they're going to *pay* me for this?" Natalie felt kindly and expansive. Gone was that tight little pang of . . . well, who knew what it had been? She looked at Barbara Valentine and felt almost fond of her. Barbara was in love with her job, which is how it ought to be. Fine. Good. She'd work hard, she'd work late, she'd work extra—and she'd love every minute of it. Absolutely ideal! And if Jake came mooning around, making it even more interesting, well, so much the better. It might even add a little extra spice to the next meeting of the Mutual Aid Society.

There was lasagna for dinner at the Webers', a great big dish of it, with succulent steam escaping from under the slabs of melted cheese. Next to it on the table was a large wooden bowl heaped with salad greens; and, wrapped in a napkin, a crusty, fragrant Italian bread.

"Why does Audrey always cook so much when there are only three of us?" Natalie said. It looked and smelled di-

vine, but something about the sight of it, arranged so carefully on the table, made her feel vaguely guilty.

"Because I'm always hungry," offered Melissa. "Gimme a big piece, Dad. I told Audrey to make a *lot* . . ."

"Well, she certainly did," Nat said. "There's enough to feed a small army for a *month*. Maybe you ought to keep your thoughts to yourself, Melissa, and let Audrey run the kitchen."

"Audrey *likes* me to tell her what I want. She says it makes it more fun to cook that way . . ."

"Audrey isn't supposed to be having *fun*, sweetie pie. Just a small piece for me, Jer, please . . . I said *small*, not infinitesimal . . ."

"Sorry, sweetheart." Deftly, he scooped up an additional slice and slid it onto her plate and then served Melissa. "There you go, love. Nice big piece. Oh . . . hot sausage . . . mmmm . . . did you order that, Missy?"

"Sausage." Natalie laughed shortly. "Oho, there, Melissa. Do I remember wrongly or were you a vegetarian this morning?"

"Woops," Melissa said, through a gigantic mouthful. "I forgot . . . and anyway," she added, after she had swallowed her food, "I couldn't be because Elizabeth brought ham sandwiches and I traded with her anyway . . ."

"Oh, swell. And after I left Audrey a special message and all, explaining very carefully how you were never going to eat meat again as long as you lived . . ."

"Oh sweetheart, the kid's entitled. We're all human beings, nobody's perfect . . . ."

"Jerry, for God's sake, I'm not talking perfection. I'm talking about people sticking to their own goals, for Christ's sake. Melissa is eleven—not a baby!"

"Sweetheart, you set such high standards for yourself. You forget that others may have different needs. We all have to do what's comfortable for ourselves . . ."

"No, goddammit, we *don't*, Jerry! If we all did what was comfortable, *nothing* would ever be accomplished—"

"Hey, come on everybody," Melissa complained. "It's like a broken record. I'm bored of hearing it every dinnertime."

Natalie stared at her daughter. Did they always quarrel

at the dinner table? Could it be true? Irritated, she looked around for the wine bottle and poured herself a hefty glass. "How did that spelling test come out?" she asked. Best to just change the subject.

Melissa made a face. "That was last week, Mommy. And I already told you I got them all right . . . Daddy, remember you promised to help me write my book report on *Johnny Tremayne* . . ."

Was it typical, Natalie wondered, for a girl Melissa's age to always turn to her father for help? Wasn't there supposed to be a pulling away or something? Oh well. She drank the wine thirstily. It was icy cold and dry. "What's this wine, Jer?"

"Bardolino. Do you like it?"

"Ummm. I could write wonderful copy for it."

"Speaking of which," Jerry said, shoveling a great forkful of lasagna into his mouth. She wished he wouldn't do that; it was very irritating. And he would continue to talk while chewing, without a pause. "How'd your new lady work out? The sous-chef or whatever?"

"Barbara Valentine? Well, I may have to put a bag over her head." Natalie began to laugh. "Jer, you wouldn't believe this unless you'd seen it. Jake is *enamored* . . . no, I'm not kidding . . . Jake is positively drooling at the feet of this perfectly ordinary middle-aged very tall, well, all right, very, very pretty, woman . . . I mean—" And she launched into Jake's fantasy as he had followed Barbara down the street that morning.

Halfway through, Melissa banged on the table. "We have a *rule*, Mommy. No business until after dessert . . ."

"Oh, Melissa," she said, "this isn't *business* . . . This is monkey business—"

"Now, sweetheart, the child's right. Right is right. She's entitled to our attention until after dessert . . ." He beamed upon his daughter. "The Lord knows she gets to see little enough of you . . ."

"Don't start in on that, Jer."

He smiled and reached for the wine bottle. "Not starting, sweetheart. Just reminding you that we did all agree to that rule . . ."

"And I," Natalie said, pushing herself away from the

table in a sudden fury, "am entitled to hold a normal conversation, without being hemmed in by rules and regulations that I don't even remember making or having anything to do with—Excuse me, I have some phone calls to make."

"That's okay, Mom," Melissa said. "Because Daddy and I have to discuss secretly what we're going to do for your birthday. It's only a month away."

Natalie whirled around. "Wait a minute here! You guys promised—"

"Now, sweetheart, we didn't, you know."

"I said I didn't want anything done for this birthday and I *meant* it. Last year was bad enough—having everyone at that party to watch me become forty—"

"Mommy!" Melissa protested. "You said you *loved* it!"

"Well, actually I did—in a way. But I told you, Melissa. After the big four-oh, I'm going backward—"

"Good, we can have a thirty-ninth!" Melissa giggled.

"Nat, Nat," Jerry rumbled, reaching for his pipe. "Not to worry. It'll just be the three of us . . ."

She looked at him. His face was as bland as ever, but was there some kind of twinkle in his eye? Was he planning one of his wonderful ideas, like last year's blast at the Carlyle Room? She'd never forget *that*; she thought she was meeting him for a quiet drink and she hadn't even bothered to put on fresh lipstick . . . and there they all were, two hundred of their closest friends and a photographer. Oh, those pictures!

"Jerry . . . don't pull a number on me."

"Would I dare, sweetheart? Do that to *you*?"

As she went down the hall, Natalie wondered. Had there been something in his voice? But no, he wouldn't dare.

Barbara emerged from the subway into the arcade of the St. George Hotel feeling somewhat grubby. The party or whatever it was had been fun; but now the wine was wearing off and she could feel the beginnings of a headache throbbing in her temples. And dammit she *knew* she was supposed to pick up something on her way home, but what was it? She couldn't remember.

She hurried out into the street, averting her eyes from the two smelly vagrants who slept on the floor in the arcade . . . who also urinated on the floor in the arcade, until the liquor store owner came out and told them to get lost. But they always came back. It was maddening, here in Brooklyn Heights, a historical landmark for heaven's sake, and according to *New York* magazine the second most desirable neighborhood in New York City. Bums right outside the subway! It was disgusting, that's what it was. All very well, going into the city filled with excitement because you were part of the Madison Avenue scene. Why did you have to come back at the end of the day, when you were already a bit tired and just a teensy bit hungover, to this . . . blight. All right, they were people, sure they were, and it was pathetic. But, as Mark always said, the Valentines were homeowners and they paid their taxes and they had a right to a decent neighborhood.

Warm with indignation, she pushed out onto Clark Street, turned on Hicks and strode rapidly toward her corner. Once again, the light was not on outside their front door. Dammit, it was *dusk*. She let herself in and as soon as she stepped into the familiar, wax-smelling hallway, her anger dissolved. It was good to be home. "Hello!" she caroled. No answer. "Hello! Hello? Hell-O!" Nothing.

She took the stairs two at a time, determined not to get mad. They didn't have to be hanging around, waiting for her. It was 7:00, and she had expected to be home around an hour ago.

The lights on the parlor floor were all on, and there was Mark, on his hands and knees, diddling with a bunch of wires in one corner of the living room. "Darling!" she cried and ran over to give him a kiss.

"Minute," Mark grunted. "I've almost got it . . . damn . . ."

"Don't bother yourself," Barbara said, fighting annoyance. "I have to get dinner. I'll catch you later." Funny, she thought, as she marched back to the kitchen. When the kids were little and she was always so busy with them all the time, he had made damn sure to let her know how much it *hurt* him when she didn't stop everything to give him a big hug and kiss the minute he came in the

door. "The Dragon Slayer is home," he used to announce; and woe betide the woman or child who did not immediately put on a happy face and come a-running.

Scott was in the kitchen; that is, he was half in the refrigerator, nothing but his skinny rump and legs showing. "Scott! We're having dinner in a few minutes!"

Mouth full, he backed away and grinned at her. "Hi, Ma. It was getting late and I was hungry."

"You're always hungry." She went on tiptoe and held her face up. "How about a kiss, big boy?"

"Oh, Ma! Aren't I too big for that?"

"Maybe you are, but I'm not."

"Well, okay. Sure." He colored and leaned over to give her a quick peck on the cheek. She could smell turkey and Russian dressing. "Oh, Scott, such a heavy snack! And after I made the lasagna ahead of time and everything— You *did* put it in the oven like I said in my note?"

Cramming more sandwich into his mouth, Scott nodded. Then, swallowing, he said, "Yeah, and I even turned on the oven, even though you didn't write it down."

"I didn't! Oh my God! What temperature?" Quickly, she raced to the wall oven, peering in. The big rectangular lasagna pan sat in the middle, its contents peaceably bubbling. Nothing was burning.

"Gee, Ma, I'm not dumb, you know. Everything bakes at three-fifty, I remember that."

"You're a wonderful person and a perfect son, and would you set the table for me?" Without waiting for his answer, she dove into the refrigerator for the two big bags of salad greens, all torn apart and washed, ready to go; and the foil-wrapped Italian bread. "And," she added, sotto voce, to herself, "So am I a wonderful person. In five minutes, I will have one helluva dinner on the table and my family will hardly realize I haven't been here cooking all day . . ." She bustled about for a moment, throwing the greens into a big bowl and shoving the bread into the oven. Mmmm, the lasagna smelled terrific. "Hey!" she shouted. "Scott?"

"Yo!"

"Where's your sister?"

"Oh gawd, where else? In her room, doing her mumbo jumbo!"

"Scott! don't make fun of Jen . . . it's very important to her now."

"Well, it's nerdy if you ask me. And those friends of hers—"

"Will you quit bellyaching and go get her?" Now she was moving swiftly with her customary efficiency. She had designed the kitchen herself, so it functioned perfectly for the way she worked. But her toes were being pinched by the high-heeled shoes, and there wasn't time to run upstairs and change. She'd leave a comfortable pair of shoes in the kitchen from now on. Into the bowl with the salad greens. Butter out of the fridge. Let it warm up and then maybe she'd mash in some garlic . . . didn't she have a jar of chopped garlic in oil somewhere in there? . . . oil, vinegar, the tarragon this time, and a bit of—

Suddenly she was grabbed and squeezed, nearly dropping the lemon juice. "Ohmygod . . . Mark what are you *doing*?" He pressed his body close into hers and nuzzled into her neck. "Nice stuff," he murmured. "Oh yum."

"Mark! I'm working! let me get dinner!"

"No. I want a little appetizer." He turned her around, firmly removing the bottle of lemon juice from her hand. "Come on, woman, show me you love me."

"I love you, I love you. But I have to get dinner." She was half laughing. "Mark!" His hands slid teasingly over her breasts and then moved down her hips and over her buttocks. "Yum, yum," he said. "That's *nice*." His lips moved over her cheek, seeking her mouth.

"Mark! Come on! The kids!" But there was no stopping him once he started in, and she finally gave up, offering her lips for a long, breathless kiss.

"There," Mark said, patting her rump and grinning. "Wasn't that worth it?"

"Yes," Barbara admitted. Well, it was. Even after all these years, when he put his mouth or his hands on her, her heart raced. His kisses still made her go liquid. "You are still the best kisser in the mid-Atlantic states."

"If you give me Florida, too, I'll do it again."

"Later, later." She wriggled in his grasp as his hands groped under her waistband. "The kids!"

"Let the kids get their own dinner," he whispered. "Look what you've done to me." He guided her hand to his belly. He was erect. "Mark! I hear them coming!"

He tightened his grip a bit. "Hey, baby, Papa's had a rough day out there battling the dragons . . . I need some R & R."

"Well, baby, Mama's had a rough, tough day, too and *I* need something to eat . . . I'm starving!"

Abruptly he released her. "Aha, so you're finding out it's not all fun and games out there with the big boys. I told you!"

Barbara fought down a stab of annoyance. "When we got married," she said lightly, "you promised me that being in love meant never having to say I told you so."

Mark laughed and picked up the salad bowl. "Okay, okay, but you owe me one. What else do you want on the table? And come to think of it, I'm hungry myself. Dinner's late. Or is this how it's going to be from now on?"

"I really don't know." She peered into the oven window. The lasagna was ready. She took it out just as Jen and Scott came pounding down the stairs. Oh, it was good to be home, to be together, warm and comfortable, with dinner about to go on the table, and her shoes about to be kicked off. "We all met in Natalie's office . . . after work . . ." They all sat, except for her, and she began to serve. She started to say, "there's always a bottle of wine for the group after work;" but instead, she said, "It seems the group meets every evening at five o'clock for a wrap-up . . . I'm not sure if that's always going to include Millard and me. It may be that dinner will be a little later . . ."

"Oh, Ma! I'll starve!"

"And I have so much homework!"

Exasperated, Barbara passed the last plate and sat down gratefully. Suddenly, she realized that her limbs were heavy with fatigue. "Don't worry, you'll all still get fed," she said shortly and dug into her piece of lasagna, thinking, I mustn't get back into my old bad habits or I'll put all that weight right back on. She should have made herself a plain

meat patty; but it was just too much to think about. "And, Jennifer, you know you can start your homework *before* dinner. There's no law against it."

Jennifer mumbled something.

"What?" Barbara demanded.

"Meditation. I have to have that time before I eat. It's not good if my stomach is full."

"Oh, Jen, don't hem yourself in with so many rigid rules. The world will give you more than enough of them." She eyed her daughter. Had Jen lost weight? She had been such a beautiful little girl, with her pink cheeks and blond curls and big round blue eyes . . . people always stopped the carriage to ooh and ahh over her. The little snub nose had long since changed to a more adult shape, of course, but tonight it looked sharp and bony, and her chin seemed small and pointed. She was all eyes with blue smudges under them. "Are you getting enough sleep, Jennifer?"

"Yes. I'm fine." She pushed the lasagna around on her plate, mashing it with her fork but eating almost nothing.

"You're not eating," Mark said. "You haven't eaten a full meal in days."

"It's those crazy nuts she's hanging around with," Scott said around a mouthful of noodles. "They're a bunch of brown-rice freaks who think you have to starve to find God." He snorted with disgust and ripped another huge hunk off the loaf.

"Ugh," Jennifer said. "You should talk. Just look at you, shoveling food into your mouth as fast as you can. I'll bet you don't even taste it. You're just an *animal*—"

Mark put his utensils down carefully. "I don't like this kind of name-calling. Jennifer: you might take a leaf from your brother's book and eat a bit better. You're getting skinny. Scott: your sister's friends are none of your business. I'm sure they're nice kids. And now that ends the whole discussion." He picked up his fork, and Barbara marveled at how certain he was that it was indeed the end of the discussion.

"Oh that's okay, Dad," Jennifer said. "He doesn't bother me. I have found that quiet place within me, and mere words are powerless to hurt me."

Barbara smiled at her daughter. "Jen, you're terrific. Sixteen years old and you've found that quiet place within you? I'm still looking for mine." She laughed, but Jennifer did not join her, and she felt a little twinge of puzzlement. Maybe the child was anemic . . . she was certainly awfully quiet. Or . . . was this a number she was pulling on Barbara for daring to go to work?

"May I, Mom?"

"Oh excuse me, I didn't hear that."

Mark said, "Jennifer wants to have a party here next Saturday . . . do we have anything on?"

"It seems to me we're having dinner guests that night . . . yes, yes, we are. Your sister, Mark, and Steffie and Craig."

"Oh, that's okay, Mom. We won't make any noise. We'll stay downstairs in the family room. We won't dance, or play loud music or anything like that."

"Hell no!" Scott yelled, pushing salad into his mouth. "They won't do anything *normal* like dance or listen to music or try to make out—"

"Oh *gross*, Scott. Excuse me please." Jennifer left. She really did look skinny; Mark was right.

As Jennifer fled up the stairs, Mark frowned. "What's *with* her anyway?"

"I don't know," Barbara admitted. "I don't know. Probably just a case of adolescence."

"She's a case all right." That was Scott.

"Enough of that, Scott," Mark ordered. "Your own friends leave something to be desired. As far as I've ever been able to see, all they're good for is emptying the refrigerator and leaving a mess for your mother to clean up . . . and she's not going to have the time to do that stuff anymore, you know!"

"Mark, Mark, enough. Things are not going to change so much. I'll talk to Jennifer. I'll keep the kitchen nice and clean. Just don't worry about it. Scott's just fine. Everything's just fine. Nothing's going to change. I promise."

10 Central Park

Jake and I used to do this all the time," Natalie said. "When we were kids and still single." She laughed. "We'd go to Sid's and buy two pastramis on rye, two extra-large pickles, and two celery tonics and then we'd march up Fifth Avenue to the Park . . . just like we're doing today, Barbara. Ta-da!" And she gestured grandly at the Plaza Hotel with the Park beyond, most of the trees blazing with their fall colors. She slid her eyes over to see what Barbara was making of all this. Nothing much apparently. She looked accepting and fairly interested but not exactly enthralled.

"You two must have known each other a long time," Barbara said. "You're *constantly* referring to each other."

Natalie's heart lifted. So he talked about her . . . good. And then, like a blow, the thought came: what did she mean, *constantly*? Did he see her *that* often? When?

"He constantly refers to me? What bad taste the man has. Doesn't he know it's not done? Talking about one's friend behind her back?"

"Oh, he's not talking about you *that* way. But every time he comes into the kitchen to visit, your name comes up." They crossed the wide sidewalk at the edge of the Park, walking around the line of horse-drawn carriages waiting at curbside for tourists. The pungent smell of horse was unexpected but not unpleasant. Today it mingled in the bright sunshine with the smell of fallen leaves and the 'mums stuck behind the ears of one of the horses.

"I'll take you to Our Rock," Natalie said, her tone capitalizing the words. "God, how jealous we used to be of that

damned rock. If we found anyone else sitting on it, we felt all huffy and cheated. What babies we were!"

Barbara smiled. "Speaking of babies—while you and Jake were playing King of the Mountain in Central Park, I was pushing a baby carriage and another one on the way. Funny, isn't it?"

"Your kids are teenagers, aren't they? Melissa is only eleven . . . I can hardly wait for her to grow up."

"Oh Lord, Natalie, do you know what you're saying? Do you have any idea what it's like to deal with a teenage girl? I mean . . . for instance, now she's a vegetarian suddenly!"

Natalie threw her head back and laughed. "Oh, really? Melissa's turned vegetarian ten times during the last month. So what's the difference?"

"The difference? The difference is that Jennifer means it. And at sixteen, if she doesn't want to communicate with me, she knows exactly how not to . . ." She sighed slightly. "It's strange. I used to know her so well—she's my first-born and for a long time, my entire being was centered on her, her quirks, her feelings, her fears, her every thought—and now she's a tall, pretty stranger who stonewalls every question I ask her.

"Mark insists," she went on after a moment or two, "that all of this . . . her withdrawal . . . really started when I accepted a job with you."

"And did it?" Natalie asked.

"Of course not! You see yourself that it starts at ten or eleven, all these notions. I'm afraid I've totally spoiled my husband. I've always taken care of everything as it came along—from Scott's heartache when he didn't make the junior varsity basketball team, to Jennifer's first crush, to fixing dinner for fifteen important clients on half a day's notice. I've always been there, available. And now—"

"I know, I know where you're coming from. Don't they say that everyone needs a good wife? I know I do. So I hired Audrey. Oh, Jerry can cook all right, but he feels that it's his God-given right not to do so—unless of course, it's for company and then of course he loves it, because then of course everyone fusses over what a wonderful, atypical man he is. Ha!"

"Well, Mark hasn't been in the kitchen since he supervised the installation of the cabinets—which he designed, otherwise I don't know whether he would have showed up even for that." They walked along the curving pathway for a few minutes in silence. "Of course," Barbara said then, "he chooses all the wines. Food is women's work but wine is okay, I guess. Well, he read six or seven books on the subject before he built up our cellar." She laughed easily. "He built it in what used to be the coal hole; but you better not tease him about that. Wine is one of the things he takes *very* seriously.

"Oh goody, there's my rock." It was a veritable mountain of a rock outcrop, looming over the pathway. Directly below, if you turned the other way, another walk curled down into the entrance to the Children's Zoo. Barbara looked up; halfway to the top of the rock, on a ledge, a young couple lay on their backs, side by side, fingertips touching, their faces thrust up to the sunshine. Two empty yogurt cartons rested on the boy's stomach.

"That's okay," Natalie said, answering her unspoken question. "That's not our spot anyway. Come on, *we* sit over on the other side."

Once they had settled themselves on pages of *The New York Times* atop the rock, they unwrapped the spicy-smelling sandwiches and began to eat ravenously. "Picnics are wonderful," Barbara said around a mouthful of pickle. "But they always make me twice as hungry as usual."

"Don't you find your eyes are bigger than your stomach?"

"Me? Never! I'm a former fatty and, like alcoholism, it's a never-ending battle. I mean, right now I could have another sandwich, easily. And yet, I see you're leaving part of yours."

"I've had enough."

"I know," Barbara said. "And so have I. But I never really *know* it; I have to tell myself each time. 'Barbara,' I have to say, 'you've had enough.' It isn't fair, really. Here we are, sitting on a rock eating lunch and, with every passing second, you're burning more calories than I am."

Natalie glanced down at her neat thighs and flat belly. It

was true, she never had to think about it much. She'd always been slender and relatively uninterested in eating.

"Actually," she said thoughtfully, "I'm not really crazy about food. Isn't that strange, considering I head up the food group?" She laughed. "Don't tell Peter Marcus I said that, will you? He'd consider it traitorous, I'm sure. Or perverted, or maybe hilariously funny, you can't tell with him. . . ."

"But don't you do most of the cooking at home?"

"No, I told you: I have Audrey. Audrey cooks. I'm a terrible cook. I made it a *point* to be lousy. Poor Jerry . . . his first wife was very good I understand. He traded in a great meal every night of his life, and for what? . . ." She pursed her lips and gazed off into the distance. "And for what, I wonder? For youth, for excitement, for my big brown eyes looking adoringly up at him . . . he was my boss, you know . . . Agh, poor Jerry! he wasn't any too thrilled when Jake dragged me back to work, but at least now, with Audrey doing the cooking, he's well fed!"

Barbara licked the remnants of deli mustard from her fingers and leaned back on her hands, enjoying the rich, still warm sunlight. "I guess I ought to get myself an Audrey . . . But I can't, not yet. They're so used to me cooking, I don't know how Mark would take having a stranger making the meals . . ."

"All very well," said Natalie, "that your husband wouldn't like it. But how in hell does he expect you to work all day and then come home and make fantastic dinners?"

Barbara laughed. "By magic! Actually, I prepare everything I can the night before. And I do a lot of cooking and freezing on the weekends. You know: when you make a batch of something, you make double, or triple. Instead of one dozen muffins, I make three dozen. Instead of one casserole, I do two . . . that sort of thing."

"But that doesn't leave you much time, does it?"

"Time? For what? I love to cook. And my family . . . well, my family comes first. Woops, maybe I shouldn't say that to you."

"Oh hell, Barbara, you can say anything you damn well

please. As long as Millard continues to beam and purr and adore you, what do I care about your priorities? They're your business."

"I'm just a child of the fifties . . . I feel I have to answer to any authority figure." Barbara laughed shortly.

"Especially your husband."

"Oh no, not Mark! We're partners. We've always done everything together. That's probably why he's finding it a little bit difficult getting used to my being away. It's been eighteen years of *Togetherness* . . . remember that slogan?"

"Will anyone ever forget it? *McCall's* didn't know it, but they shaped a whole generation . . . or should I say, created a monster?"

"Togetherness is okay, Natalie. I love my husband and he loves me . . . in many ways, we're still just a couple of kids in love with each other . . ." She flushed a little. "Well, maybe I shouldn't feel so smug about what we have. I've never known anything else. I started going with him before I was eighteen, and I've never looked at another man since!"

Natalie gave her a sharp look. "Never? Not even for a fantasy moment?"

"Never. When you meet him, you'll understand why. He's . . . well, let me be perfectly honest, he's gorgeous." Natalie laughed and Barbara joined in. "But he is," she protested. "I know it sounds like a typical wife bragging but . . . well, you'll see. Everybody says so. Wait, I think I have a picture . . ." She dug into her leather bag. "Not very good; he's not always photogenic—ah, here it is." And, with a proud smile, she handed Natalie a wallet-sized portrait.

No two ways about it: He was gorgeous. Too serious-looking but truly handsome. Big square jaw, aquiline nose, straight, even brows, thick wavy hair . . . everything perfect. He reminded her of the male models who came to the agency from time to time looking for jobs. And, like the models, there was something remote, something unreal about that classic look.

"You're right," she said. "He's some looker, your husband. Have you ever shown Jake this picture?"

"No. Why should I?"

"Well, to let him know *gornisht helfn* . . ." She laughed.

"Beg your pardon?"

"A Yiddish phrase, Barbara, meaning 'it won't do you a bit of good, buddy, no matter how hard you try.' See, Jake got a look at you the first day you came to work, and he immediately came dancing into my office to declare you Girl of his Dreams . . ."

Barbara blushed again. "Oh, Natalie, you're kidding. He didn't!"

"Oh, but he did." Natalie got up, carefully brushing crumbs from her flannel skirt. "He was positively smitten."

"Oh, he's such a nut! He didn't really *mean* it!"

"Mmmm . . . I wouldn't be so sure. It's been . . . what is it, three weeks? . . . and he's still carrying on. You mean he hasn't said anything to *you*? Isn't that just like a man! Probably afraid to give you a swelled head."

Barbara stood up too, collecting all their trash and stuffing it neatly into the delicatessen bag. "Oh, every time he sees me he says, 'Be still, my palpitating heart!' But he says stuff like that to everybody."

Natalie smiled to herself. "Perhaps. Perhaps. But if I were you . . . I'd show him that picture!"

11 Mark Meets Natalie

Barbara struggled to pull on her boots and then decided to hell with it . . . and let them drop to the floor. Then she kicked them across the room for good measure. She'd rather have glamorous feet, thank you. What a shock it had been, after running out to Zig-Zag on the Heights and buying herself all those glorious new things: the silk shirts and the tailored pants and the silky sweaters, to find that she wasn't supposed to wear shoes on the job. Well, yes, she could put something on her feet, but they were white and thick-soled and had laces and were eminently *sensible.*

Millard had explained it to her: "My dear, the *standing*! it is not to be believed! No chef worth his—or her—salt would *dream* of coming into a kitchen shod in anything less than three inches thick of good substantial leather. And can you imagine if a large iron pot fell on your foot?" He himself wore steel-toed construction worker boots from Sears or L L Bean or someplace like that. "I learned to wear them in school, my dear Barbara, and it just seems natural." But what an incongruous base to his lean Brooks Brothers elegance. And she obediently came in every morning and changed into what she could not help but think of as hospital shoes.

So to hell with the heavy boots, snow or no snow. She sat on one of the butcher-block counters and slid on her

new pointy-toed shoes: black leather, with laces and tiny curved heels. She stretched out her legs and arched her feet, admiring her narrow ankles.

"Beautiful!" came a familiar voice from the doorway. "Best legs on Mad Mad Ave—and I'm all alone with them. Heh heh, me proud beauty, and all that jazz!"

"Oh, Jake! How you do go on!" She dropped her legs quickly. She knew he was kidding and yet she knew he wasn't. It was awfully flattering, but sometimes she wished he'd go a little easy. In the first place, people were beginning to make cracks about it; and in the second . . . "But I'm safe this time. Millard's just around the corner, in the storeroom."

"Locking away the baba au rhum, the cooking sherry, and the X-rated fortune cookies, no doubt. Well, all right, beautiful Barbara, I'll settle for strolling to the elevator with those gorgeous gams. You ready?"

"More than," Barbara said. This wine drinking in Natalie's office every single day after work was getting to her. She always came home just a wee bit woozy and needed another glass right away to clear her head. The other night, while preparing beef bourguignon, she finished a half bottle before she even realized it. She'd have to watch it. And it was an annoyance, this fuzzy feeling, especially *this* evening. Finally, after nearly five weeks, Mark had agreed to meet her after work. They were going out for dinner. He refused to come all the way up to the office. Didn't he *want* to see where she spent her time? Wasn't he curious about what she did all day, every day?

She wondered who from M & M would be in the lobby when she met him. She could just visualize it: he'd be looking around anxiously, wondering where she was. Anyone looking at him would think, "What a handsome man, wonder what he's doing here, wonder what lucky lady he's waiting for. And then she'd step off the elevator and catch his eye, and his face would light up and he'd stride to her and give her a wonderful kiss. And they'd all say, oh my God, he's Barbara's. And then he'd sweep her out the revolving door and they'd go right to—Where were they going? Had they even discussed it? She shook her head.

"What did I say wrong now?"

"Oh, Jake, I forgot you were there . . . ooh . . . I mean . . . is it still snowing?"

"Oh yeah, you and Millard are here in never never land with no windows . . . whereas I, on the other hand, am blessed with a corner office, three gigantic windows, wall-to-wall carpeting, and a wonderful leather couch, my dear. . . . In case you ever want to see what the weather is, just come on in and lie down."

"Seriously—"

"Seriously, it snowed at three-fifteen, it melted at four oh seven. You can show off your Betty Grables, don't worry. It'll just make me prouder." He offered her his arm and she took it, wondering just what crazy thing he'd do this time. It wasn't too crazy, just singing "We're Off to See the Wizard" all the way down the corridor. He even remembered the funny little dance Judy Garland did in the movie.

In reception, Gloria was patting her stiff silver hairdo, reassuring herself that it was in place.

"I *thought* it was you, Mr. Miller," sniffed Gloria.

He let Barbara's arm go and waltzed himself over to Gloria.

"Oh really, my dear? Didn't you, just for a fleeting moment, think it was Mel Torme dancing and singing his way into your heart?"

She looked blank and just a bit put out. "I knew it was you because nobody else around here sings in the halls."

"Right. The others practice in their offices."

Barbara watched Gloria's face with great interest. It might have been made out of plaster for all the response it showed. Out of lacquer, rather, for there was a strange iridescent quality about it, a sheen on the marble skin filled with hints of rainbow tints. The eyes, wide dark eyes set far apart, were empty; that's what was so fascinating. Personally, Barbara found it impossible to believe the rumors that Gloria was sleeping with Peter Marcus. She couldn't imagine Gloria in bed with anyone. Surely those marble limbs were incapable of bending; surely that permanent hairdo was made of steel wires, those glossy red lips were plastic.

Jake danced about the great mirrored desk and deftly

snatched the rose from its crystal vase. "Now wait just a minute, Mr. Miller—!" Aha, thought Barbara, so Gloria *could* get excited. There was no change of expression save for a tiny frown between the eyes; but the voice was definitely agitated. "That's Mr. Marcus's rose!"

"No, no, this is a Marcus and Morrisey rose and it does its job from nine to five and it is now . . . five-thirty-one and it wants to step out . . ." Now he danced over to Barbara and bowed low, offering her the dripping flower. Barbara backed away a little, laughing. He really was an incredibly goofy fellow. It was just like being in college again, having him and his antics all the time.

"To the fairest of the fair and the sweetest of the sweet . . . Come, accept this token of my everlasting adoration and come have some booze with me."

Barbara shook her head. "Oh Jake, you tempt me. I'd love to accept your wet rose and have a drink with you, but I'm meeting Mark . . . I finally got him to agree to a night out in Manhattan . . ."

Jake quickly turned away and did a mock-tragic stagger. "Always a bridesmaid . . ." he said wryly and then, without a pause, "Ah, the beauteous Debbie."

Debbie, who had just come in from the office, stared at him. "Hi, Mr. M," she said with care. "Isn't that Mr. Marcus's rose?"

"That's what I told him," sniffed Gloria.

"No," Jake insisted, "it is *not* Peter's rose, it is yours, my dear Deborah. Then *you* can come and have a drink with me . . ." He proffered the flower, which was by now beginning to droop a bit.

Debbie opened her mouth, but whatever she was going to say to him was lost forever as a plaintive wail cut through from the doorway. It was Peter Marcus, his silver-gray hair in disarray, his tie unknotted and askew.

"Jake! I need you!"

"Peter, Peter! I was just on my way out."

"No, you weren't. You were just on your way to my office." There was something steely and unpleasant in his voice that Barbara had never noticed before, and she glanced toward Jake to see how he would handle this.

Jake laughed. "I must have been walking backward then, 'cause I could have sworn I was about to step into the elevator. Farewell, fair ladies." And flourishing the rose, he marched smartly—backward—past Peter Marcus and down the corridor. Even Peter had to laugh—unwillingly, it looked like—and as she and Debbie stepped into the elevator, gleeful, the last thing she saw was Peter laughing. Far, far better than that strange distance she had sensed when he came in. Well, Jake had guts. He was always himself, unafraid to be himself no matter what the situation. He treated everyone exactly the same . . . it was wonderful, in a world full of poses and poseurs.

She and Debbie laughed all the way down in the elevator. And then the doors slid open and there was Mark, over in the corner. Not looking for her, his head bent over the newspaper.

Mark tried very hard to concentrate on Safire's column. He liked Safire's writing, enjoyed the way the man's mind worked. But this evening it was impossible. His eyes kept sliding over the words without registering them. Oh hell. It was too noisy in this lobby . . . lousy design, amplifying every footstep, every whisper—even the goddam bells on the elevators, dammit! You could tell it was one of Brad Parker's masterpieces. God, anyone with half a brain knew these cavernous lobbies weren't good for anything except maybe holding rock concerts. Not in the proper scale, that was the problem. But Brad Parker was a lousy architect. His one big talent was in selling himself to rich clients!

Rich clients! He nearly groaned aloud. Lunch today had been spent with some rich clients of his own—he hoped. What a day! What made people in the process of planning a building so impossible to deal with? He'd never been able to figure it out. They came to him—to him and Craig, actually—for their expertise . . . because they were professionals. And then they spent the whole time arguing about matters they didn't know the first thing about. Take today, for instance.

There they were, the three of them: Ezra Cranston of Cranston Liquor Industries, Mrs. Cranston, who insisted

upon being called by the ridiculous name of Dodie, a name he kept choking on, and himself. Craig almost never went on these lunches; he was their inside man. He always said, "Hell, Mark's so much prettier than I am; they just melt looking across the table at him. When they look across the table at me, they faint!" Okay, it was a joke but it wasn't really true. First of all, Craig wasn't a bad-looking guy. And secondly, good looks weren't always the asset ordinary-looking people thought they were. He had to work damn hard to sell not only himself and the firm, but their ideas. Most people didn't know diddly about architecture.

Well, Dodie Cranston sure as hell didn't. But that didn't stop her from poking her stupid ideas into every aspect of the conversation.

He'd gone all the way uptown, to take them to Cafe Argenteuil, sparkling with its mirrors and spanking white tablecloths. The service as usual was impeccable, and the noise level reasonable. Over drinks—stupidly he had ordered a martini for himself—everything was fine. They made dumb social noises. The intrepid Dodie showed him about 30 bad snapshots of their new vacation house, designed of course by a rival—one of his oldest rivals, in fact. He thought it an ugly house, different just for the sake of being different. But what really irritated him was the lack of sensitivity that made her show him the snapshots. They didn't want Mark Valentine for a beach house. They wanted Mark Valentine for his specialty: an urban high-rise. So why spread out these damn dumb pictures and stare at him, smiling, until he commented. What the hell else did she expect him to say, other than what he did say: "Oh. Nice. Very nice." She did a lot of staring and smiling, as if daring him to make a mistake. What a ball-breaker! She marries Cranston—he's got to be 20 years her senior—after he's made his fortune, she falls into a meal ticket to beat all meal tickets, and now she wants to call all the shots!

"What I want," she had the nerve to say, "is a building that will be a monument to Ezra Cranston. Something unique and unforgettable and world-famous. Yet tasteful and appropriate."

Tasteful and appropriate! He had to bite his lips to keep from laughing. Maybe she thought the way she looked was in good taste. He didn't. The diamonds on her fingers were too large; the dress was real silk and obviously expensive but cut too low . . . there was just a bit too much of everything about her.

"Monuments," he said carefully, "have a way of dating themselves. The greatest tribute I can create for Ezra Cranston is a building that is beautiful and functional and that works for the people who work in it . . ."

"Couldn't have said that better myself," said Cranston, chewing on his dead cigar and laughing heartily. He was a hearty little man, short and a bit squat, given to plaid suits and flamboyant gestures; but Mark knew full well that under this rather clownish exterior was one of the toughest businessmen on the Eastern seaboard. "I knew Valentine was tops in buildings; I didn't know he was so good with the words."

She smiled tightly. "Excuse me for being an ignoramus, Mr. Valentine, but what buildings have you done . . ." There was the slightest hesitation, almost not a pause. ". . . that we would know."

So it was going to be one of *those* lunches. He was accustomed to demonstrating his capabilities. After all, his clients were going to be spending a good deal of money, and they had every right in the world to see what he was all about. But every once in a while, he got someone who challenged him on a personal level. This was one of them. There was a look in her eyes, a look that said *you* don't impress *me*, Pretty Boy. Well, he wasn't here to sell his looks. It was his ability that would build old man Cranston his fucking monument, not his classic profile! It would be such a pleasure at this point to be able to get up and say, "Mrs. Cranston, get yourself another architect, one who doesn't mind your little games." He knew damn well what she was up to. A woman in her late 30s, still attractive, married to a man much older, finds herself at lunch with a good-looking young architect whose firm is on the line for a 75-million-dollar job from her husband—well, of course, she's going to try to use her power. Come across and the job's yours . . . that's really what it all amounted to. That's

what all those bright smiles and tosses of the head and display of bosom were all about. Of course, he wouldn't. He never had. The trick was to keep her happy without doing anything about it really, make sure her husband knew he wasn't about to do anything about it, and get this meeting back on the track of thinking about buildings, goddammit, instead of sex!

Smiling sweetly at her—because of course Valentine & Goodrich could not afford to throw away a 75-million-dollar job like the Cranston Building—Mark read off a list of names that she might possibly recognize, including their latest, Uptown Plaza. She was sure to have read about *that*, what with all those Upper West Side loonies taking sides, pro and con, about it. It had to be the best-known building design project in the past five years in this city. Besides which—and he cleared his throat and said quietly—"It has just been awarded the AIA Blue Ribbon Competition first prize." They had just been notified that morning at the office and he was savoring it, saving it to drop into Barbara's lap like a special gift. And it certainly wouldn't hurt his chances any to let the Cranstons know.

Old Ezra knew what the hell was what. He beamed as soon as he heard the name of the prize. "Well, then—" he said, and Mark held his breath. Folded into his inside breast pocket was their standard contract, just in case. If Cranston would sign, here and now—! Why did these men always have to bring their wives in like this at the last minute? It never did any good, and nine times out of ten, the silly women just caused problems. Dammit, before she took that damn silly job, Barbara had come to these lunches with him when he thought he would need her. It was a damned nuisance, her not being free to come now. He smiled some more at little Mrs. Cranston and leaned solicitously toward her.

"Would you like another drink? Or shall we order? Their bouillabaisse is very good . . ." And the damned woman opted for drinks. He ended up having three martinis and that was three too many. Made him feel dull all afternoon. And Del Rezzo, their engineer in Milano, had to pick this afternoon of all afternoons to keep him on the phone for

two hours . . . it always made him tense to have to think in Italian all of a sudden but today, on top of the booze and that woman and his concern about wrapping up the contract, well, he now had a headache to end all headaches. He wished he were home with his feet up, an opera on the stereo, and good smells drifting out of the kitchen.

Well, fat chance! he thought, looking around the busy lobby at the well-dressed, surprisingly young crowd surging out of the elevators and swirling into the triple revolving doors. He was stuck here, in the middle of Madison Avenue after-work throngs, to have of all the goddam things a *drink* and dinner out. Just what he needed, right? But Barbara had nagged and nagged at him for goddam weeks to meet her in her office after work—what was the big deal about meeting her at her office, for Pete's sake?—so he finally gave in. He told her: "I'll meet you in your lobby, Barbara, it's plain stupid for me to go all the way upstairs only to turn right back around and go downstairs."

Why the hell did she have to suddenly decide to play at career woman? If she got restless because the kids didn't need her so much, she could've done just about anything else! Why, he even suggested she go to Parsons or Pratt or one of those places and take some design courses . . . maybe even interior decoration. Then at least she could have helped him out; it would have been useful. Hell, their marriage was a partnership, always had been. He'd always depended on her; she knew that. But nothing would do but to find some dingbat job that didn't pay enough and took her away from home at just the hours she was needed there! It was damned annoying . . . and now she was forcing him to play at drinks-after-work. To hell with it!

He was so lost in thought that she nearly knocked him over, rushing up to him and throwing her arms around him. She knew he didn't like public displays. He put his cheek to hers briefly, holding her off a bit. "Hey! Take it easy! You're stepping on my foot!" He watched as her face froze in midsmile. Remorseful, he squeezed her shoulder and said, "You look lovely."

She gave him a smile but it wasn't a total smile, he could tell. He'd hurt her feelings goddammit, and now he'd have

to pay and pay and pay. By this time, she should know how much he loved her. After all these years, and he was still hot for her body, unlike most of the married people they knew; she ought to feel secure enough not to get hurt so easily. And she ought to realize how drained he was at the end of a busy workday! Jesus! Let a woman go to work and she forgot how to be a wife! Goddammit, he was *here*, wasn't he? He could have refused, but he was here.

He folded the paper neatly and slid it into his attaché case, saying, "Well?" in his brightest, most pleasant voice.

"Well what?"

For the love of—! "What do you mean, well what? This was your idea, babe, so where are you taking me?"

"Oh, dear . . ." From the look on her face, she hadn't the slightest idea, hadn't picked out a place. Just what he needed tonight. Trying very hard not to let the annoyance show on his face, he waited. Finally she said, "Oh, I don't know. Let's just stroll down on Madison and pick one out if it appeals to us."

"Hey, Barbie doll. It's thirty degrees out there. It's *cold*. It's damp and it's unpleasant, not my idea of the ideal evening for a stroll—"

"Oh Mark, I didn't mean *stroll*, really, I—"

From behind him came a female voice, saying, "Barbara! you're still here! I thought you flew back to Brooklyn Heights in your pumpkin on the dot of five every night!" The voice was rather deep for a woman and tinged with the kind of superior amusement that set his teeth on edge. He turned around. Just as he might have anticipated: a small, intense-looking woman, thin as a rail, no tits probably, high cheekbones, large, dark glittering eyes. With the dark fur coat belted tightly around her and the mop of dark curls frosted with white, she had a sleek, feline look, like a panther. She smiled, showing small white teeth.

Barbara greeted her enthusiastically. "Natalie! What luck! Meet my husband . . . Mark . . . And, Mark darling, *this* is Natalie Simon." She was positively beaming. So this was the big-deal creative wonder woman, well, well. He'd expected somebody more . . . well, *large* . . . imposing, somehow. He took her hand to shake it and was surprised

to feel a tiny shock, almost like electricity, when their palms touched. Her grasp was firm, her skin was warm and dry, and her large, lustrous eyes looked directly into his, taking his measure, he thought, very very swiftly. He also caught the flicker that told him she found him attractive. In spite of himself, he smiled.

"I'm here to take my wife for a drink, and it seems she doesn't know where to go," he said. "I'm sure you could help us."

The woman laughed, throwing her head back. "I'm sure I could at that. It's one area where I'm really an expert. And I'd suggest the Silver Streak, my all-time favorite, if you like art deco and a lot of quiet. . . . See, although it's a perfectly beautiful place and it's on the right block and the drinks are *huge* . . . it's always empty! My personal opinion is that it's a Mafia money laundry. . . ."

"Tell you what," he said, beginning now to feel expansive. And come to think of it, he could use a drink, after all. "You lead the way and I'll buy you a couple of those *huge* drinks."

"Oh, that's awfully sweet, but I didn't mean to—" Natalie glanced at her watch. "Not even six . . . well, I don't want to butt in . . ."

"Oh you're not, you're not," Barbara insisted. "Oh, it would be wonderful . . . we'd love to have you join us . . . then you two can have a chance to get to know each other! My two bosses!"

"Come, come, Barbara," Mark said, allowing just a trace of irritation in his tone. "I'm not exactly your *boss* . . ."

"No, more like my king."

They all laughed and Natalie looked again at her wristwatch. "If I go home now, dinner won't be ready, my daughter will be at her piano lesson, and my husband will be locked in his study, writing the life history of a red blood cell or something. Nobody expects me; I think they'd all faint if I walked in before seven . . . so I guess I'd better. Yes, thank you very much, Valentines, I'll blaze the trail and share a libation. Shall we?" And she made a grand gesture at the revolving doors. Typical smartass careerwoman type!

Barbara hooked her arm into his, they whirled through the doors and came out into the cold, crowded nighttime street, with frozen crystals of damp air dancing in the halos of the streetlights, plumes of breath rising past hunched shoulders. Natalie said, "This way," and they went—with Barbara clinging to him and giggling like a schoolgirl. What the hell, he thought, a couple of minutes . . . it couldn't be too bad.

The Silver Streak was, as promised, nearly deserted and quite charming. Exactly right, Barbara thought. It was almost totally candlelit, with a few Tiffany lamps hanging from the ceiling. The walls were gray glass, shiny and dimly reflective, filled with tiny, tiny flickers of light from all the candles. The bar was the silver streak, with chrome strips also streaking across the wall behind the lines of bottles.

The bartender, a great beefy hulk named Tony, greeted Natalie with a jaunty wave and crooked smile that revealed a shining gold tooth. "Where's Jake tonight?"

"Couldn't find him," Natalie said. "The rat!"

"Oh, he's with Peter Marcus," Barbara said, sinking into the cushioned chair that Mark pulled out for her.

"He is! How did *you* know?"

Barbara turned to give Natalie a closer look. Was she angry? But no, she was smiling, as usual, leaning casually on the bar, her fur coat open.

"Well . . . I was there . . . in reception . . . I—" She stammered and hesitated. Should she say that he had asked her to have a drink with him? Maybe not. Jake and Natalie were just friends, old friends, from before Natalie's marriage, but . . . no, there was something in Nat Simon's tone that said some other lady having a drink with Jake Miller was a no-no. Even a happily married lady like herself.

"Oh, I get it," Natalie interrupted. "Peter snagged him before he could get to the sanctuary of my office." She sighed noisily. "That man! I wonder what crisis he concocted for this evening? Peter hates to go home. I don't want to say that he makes anything up, but a crisis at Marcus and Morrisey's executive row is much more likely

to develop at five or so in the evening than at any other hour . . . except lunch, of course." She turned. "Peter does not like to eat lunch, Mark. My usual, Tony, and then we'll also have . . ." She made a kind of vague wave at them.

"Two vodka gimlets," Mark said.

"You got that, Tony?"

"You betcha, Nattie. One vitamin V on the rocks, two vodka gimlets."

"And use the Chinese vodka, please . . . It's the absolute best . . . or so I'm told." She shrugged the dark fur off and sauntered over to them, holding the coat over one shoulder, hooked onto her finger. Mark leaped up from his chair and took the coat from her, hanging it on a hook on the wall. Barbara stared at him. She had struggled to get her bulky down-filled coat off, sitting down, and he hadn't made a move until she said, "Help!" *Her* coat was on the back of her chair. She was sitting on it, squashing it with every passing moment, while her husband was being gallant as hell to a woman who could damn well afford a fur coat, so how helpless could she be?

Natalie sat herself on the other side of Mark and leaned forward, chin on her hands. "Barbara, I haven't had a chance to really talk to you . . . I mean, *really* talk to you. We're always in a crowd, it seems. Well, that's the ad game, meetings and more meetings . . . especially if you work for Peter Marcus, the original kibbutznik. . . . But I can see you've just made yourself one of the family. Millard is in seventh chef heaven, and that makes all of us food people extremely happy. . . . Mark, you have no idea what a difference your lovely wife has made in our test kitchen . . . I mean, giggles all 'round and the sounds of joyful noises all day long—"

The drinks arrived and were placed on the table. Mark took a long swallow of his and remarked: "Any work get done around that place, or is it all giggles and singing?"

"Oh. Well. Of course work gets *done* . . . I mean of course. I was paying your wife a compliment. Why so hostile?" She turned in her chair and stared directly into his face, leaning toward him.

"I'm not hostile. Not at all. But"—he made a small

face—"everybody knows the ad game is full of phonies . . . present company excluded, of course . . . But what the hell are you all doing? What do you have to show for a day's work? In my business, you're working with reality . . ."

"Hey!" Natalie sipped at her drink, frowning. "I can show you sales records for which I know I'm directly responsible. But even if I couldn't, is there any doubt in anyone's mind that advertising keeps the economy moving?"

Mark laughed shortly. "Sure. By poisoning kids' minds and teaching them to consume, consume, consume. . . . When my children were still very little, I told them, you can have anything you want within reason except for anything you've been sold on television. And I still stick with it."

"Mark!" Barbara laughed gaily. "You were more than happy to test-taste all those tahini dips I brought home . . ."

"That's different." He drained his drink and gestured for another with his head to Tony, who was watching them with interest. Then he gave a sudden grin. "That was delicious."

"There. You see? Nothing's more real than food!"

Natalie shifted in her seat. "I'll have another, too, Tony. Barbara? . . . and another for her. Don't bother to argue, Barbara. There are always people who find it easy and fun to pick on advertising. It's one of the most demanding businesses there is! Mark should only have been with us last week when all the Hasahnis came piling in for goddam *breakfast* at two in the afternoon . . . And there's Paul pulling all the shades down and saying 'Good morning' and *insisting* that everyone go along with it . . ." Natalie began to laugh. "Having a business meeting with them," she went on, "is somewhat akin to finding yourself in the middle of a circus act. They do their own thing and whoever else happens to be around just gets pulled in or just gets left out."

"Oh," Barbara gasped, "remember Abdul and Amin, always finishing each other's sentences? And how they look at each other, completely surprised, as if it had never happened before?"

"There, you see?" Mark interrupted. "Advertising is half a game and half a party. Nobody takes it seriously, not even your clients . . ."

Natalie threw back her head and roared. "You haven't met Tommy Thoms, that's for sure!"

"Tommy's *serious*," Barbara agreed. "Almost as serious as Paul . . . Pita is Paul's whole life as he keeps telling us," she explained to Mark. She put her hand on his and was a bit taken aback to find his in a tight fist.

"Oh indeed," Natalie chimed in. "If I personally have to hear the tale of how a tiny bakery in a basement on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn grew and flourished to become a mecca of the baker's art and the first and only mechanized pita-bread factory in the entire universe, thus making this splendid art of the Arab culinary experience available to one and all . . . and how Paul Hasahni himself took one thousand loaves through the streets of Manhattan, to every deli and supermarket and *supermercado*, talking managers into trying it . . ."

"And Roland . . ." said Barbara.

"Oho! you would mention Roland! Mark, you would have laughed yourself silly to see Roland Hasahni, the lone bachelor in the family, mooning over your beautiful wife . . . How many times did he kiss your hand, Barbara?" Natalie drained her glass again and called: "Tony! another round!"

Tony came over at once, thumping three glasses down. Barbara glanced at her first drink. Yes, most of it was still there in the glass, and already she was slightly dizzy. She just wasn't used to booze; especially not on top of the wine in Nat's office. Mark seemed all right, though a trifle bellicose. His jaw had that certain set even though he was trying to smile and look interested.

"Poor Roland," she said. "What a fool. You're right, Mark, it would *never* happen in Valentine and Goodrich Associates. . . ." Just imagining the Hasahnis swarming through the pale, spare, carefully designed perfection of Mark's office was enough to make you laugh. "Poor Roland . . . but honestly, Nat, it's Jake who really kills me! That man: I just adore him!" She turned to her husband,

amazed to meet his eyes and see anger glinting in them. Quickly, she added, "I mean, whenever the Hasahnis come to the office . . ." Nervously, she gulped at her drink.

Natalie picked up the story. ". . . Jake puts on his Arab headdress in honor of the occasion, as well as his best, most horrible Arab accent—a cross between his Jewish grandfather and something he heard in a French Foreign Legion movie—and comes in to . . . well, Mark, the only word that does justice to what happens is *regale* . . . he comes in, wherever the Hasahnis happen to be and regales us all with his Jake of Araby *shtick* . . ." She drank thirstily and signaled the bartender again. Then, in a sonorous put-on voice, intoned: "Oh my brothers of the desert wind . . . a desert breeze blowing, its voice oerthrowing . . . let us—" and then she broke up. "You had to be there, Mark."

"I think they'd be offended," Mark said. His voice sounded stiff. Barbara peered at him more closely. Was he still mad? Yes, he was!

Maybe she and Natalie were pouring on the M & M tall tales a bit too thick. Poor Mark, he didn't know any of these people—except for the little bits and pieces she told him over the dinner table . . . and she had been very, very careful not to say too much. The only evening she had gone into detail about something she and Millard had done that day, Mark had said, acidly: "Are twenty fallen soufflés really worth the entire dinner hour, Barbara?" She was a quick study; she cooled the agency talk after that.

And this was just the same, only more so. "Oh, honey," she said to him now, "You know, it's like that guy from Japan—Mr. what's his face, Mishimati or whatever . . ."

"Moshimoto," Mark said. "And I don't tell that many stories about him . . ."

"Oh, Mark! Shame on you for a liar. You talk about him all the time—and it's fascinating! Tell Natalie how he complained that the plaza you're planning for West 104th Street is too Japanese! And about the time he yelled at Larry Lillianthal . . . remember? . . . Rarry Rirrianfaw?—"

Natalie slammed her drink down on the table with a thump. Her hair had become mussed, Barbara noted, and

her eyes seemed feverish. Now she leaned forward so that she was almost nose to nose with Mark. "Moshimoto! You're kidding. Not the Japanese millionaire wheeler-dealer who wants to remake the entire Upper West Side!"

Now Mark came to life. "The one and the same. You know him?"

"I live there!" The words were bitten off as if tinged with gall. "That plaza and its three high-rises are a blight on the face of the earth."

Mark's lips tightened. "That's my design."

"I don't care if you built it brick by brick with your bare hands by the light of the moon . . . It's a desecration and a disgrace and it stinks!"

He leaned across the table, his jaw jutting. "Well lady, too bad for your supposed taste, but it seems that the distinguished jury of the AIA disagrees with you . . . They gave it the grand prize for this year—!"

"Ohmygod!" Barbara's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, Mark, ohmygod I'm so sorry! How could I have forgotten? Today! Today was prize day . . . oh, oh and you *won* it! Oh Mark! How marvelous! Why didn't you say anything?"

He turned and eyed her coldly. "I expected that you would remember."

"Oh, I've *never* forgotten something like this before . . . something so important—"

He waved at her impatiently, already turning back to face down Natalie, his fists clenched on the table top. "I want to know where you come off saying that Uptown Plaza is a desecration—" He nearly spit the last word out.

"Ugh, it's just another vast plaza with no sitting space . . . great faceless glass buildings that people can't relate to . . . a couple of cutesy-poo boutiques . . . Of all the ill-conceived—Listen, you know what you're doing up there? Displacing good people, ripping apart a real neighborhood and putting in its place overpopulated apartment buildings that cost too damn much to begin with; and a bunch of overpriced shops selling overpriced trinkets and schlock. Same as you guys did to Columbus Avenue!"

"Come off it, lady! Columbus Avenue was a slum,

crumbling into bits. Now it's gorgeous, now it's thriving . . . I could show you pictures—"

Dark pink stained Natalie's high cheekbones. "Pictures!" she hissed. "Pictures! Goddammit, that's *my* neighborhood up there, buddy boy! And thanks to you and all those other so-called forward-looking architecturally pure city planners, we have too fucking many head shops and not one goddam *shoemaker*, for Christ's sake, within seven blocks!"

They were glaring at each other with genuine rancor, drinks forgotten. Without taking his eyes off Natalie, Mark gritted, "It's time for us to be leaving, Barbara."

"Oh don't leave!" Natalie cried, her tone suddenly entirely changed. She put her hand on Mark's sleeve and laughed. "We were just getting to the good part, where we call each other interesting names and we this and that upon each other. You're not . . . *angry*! Oh no, you couldn't be, it was just a friendly discussion . . . ! Tony! another round!"

"Thanks, but no thanks. No, I'm not angry. We have dinner reservations." He gave her what Barbara recognized as his most wintery smile. "Barbara," he said in a tone that sounded like fingers snapping, and laid some bills on the table. Natalie pushed them back at him, saying something about it being her treat, but he ignored her. Barbara knew what to do. Quickly, she slid into her coat and went to get his, handing it to him without a word.

"We really have to hurry, Natalie," she said, not even thinking very much about what came out of her mouth as long as it filled up the silence. She kept talking about dinner and the kids and a phone call Mark had to make, all the while peering at Natalie, trying to read her. Nat suddenly seemed lonesome to her, sitting there at the littered table, the glittery look gone from her face. She looked tired, and Barbara asked, "Can we drop you anywhere?"

A glance at the watch and a swift shake of the head. "No. Not yet. I'll wait and see if old Jake turns up. He usually does." And then she straightened her shoulders and smiled broadly and the sparkle came back. "It was swell meeting you, Mark." She thrust out her hand, tossing her

head a little, and held it there until he was forced to take it. He mumbled something polite, reached out for Barbara's arm and all but pulled her out the door, gesturing for a cab with his free arm before they had even emerged completely onto the sidewalk.

In the cab, he hiked himself into the far corner. "Jesus Christ, what a ball-breaker!"

"Oh no, Mark, she's not! You have to know her. I don't know what was with her tonight; I've never seen her carry on like that . . . Maybe she was trying to impress you . . . Of course, that was it! There aren't many men as handsome as you, and she was all alone and I don't think she has much of a marriage . . . she's never in a hurry to get home . . . And I think she was just . . . oh, I don't know, *flirting* with you—"

"Some flirting! More like declaring World War Three." But she noted it had worked again. His voice was nearly back to normal, and he reached out to caress her thigh. "See, Barbara," he said, his voice dropping even lower, "*this* is how we flirt . . . We make *nice*." He picked up her hand and placed it firmly on his lap. "See?" he murmured. "Nice."

"Oh, Mark—"

"I have a terrific idea. Let's skip the restaurant and have dinner in bed."

"Oh Mark, you promised! You *promised*!"

"You're gonna try to break my balls, too? I don't like what you're learning from that woman. She's a goddam menace!"

"Of all the ridiculous things you've ever said, this takes the cake! I won't allow you to malign a perfectly wonderful, talented woman like Natalie! And furthermore—you're sulking like a four-year-old!" Her voice softened. "We've been planning this evening for two weeks. Let's not spoil it. Okay, honey?" She caressed him the way he liked it, gazing at him until he turned to her and said, "Okay, you win . . . this time."

12 Office Chatter

For a change, the train came right away and Barbara found herself walking by Natalie's office the next morning at 8:35. M & M was strangely quiet at this hour. No typewriters, no voices calling, no telephones ringing, no arguments, no laughter, no footsteps. When she peeked in, Natalie was sitting with her back to the door, staring out the window.

"Shall I make coffee . . . real coffee?" Barbara asked brightly.

Natalie swiveled around. "Oh, *would* you? Oh, Barbara, you would be blessed forever and your name put in the big golden book." She looked pinched and pale this morning, Barbara thought, what her mother used to call peaked.

"Is anything wrong, Nat?"

Natalie heaved a great sigh and wordlessly extended a gray slip of paper across the desk. It was Peter Marcus's memo paper, embossed with his name in thick silver lowercase letters, along the left-hand margin. It was a brief message, in his familiar heavy scrawl. BBDO GOT NATURE BOY, it said. NEXT TIME, TRY HARDER.

"Oh dear, Nat. I'm so sorry. You were really counting on it, weren't you?"

Wryly, Nat said: "Bonus money's already spent. Yes, I was counting on it. I was so *sure* . . . we did a helluva presentation and they seemed to love it." She gave another large sigh. "Of course, our creative director isn't married to the cousin of the sister-in-law of Nature Boy's president . . ."

"Oh, Nat, do you really think that's what did it?"

"Unfortunately, it was that kind of situation. Well,

sometimes it works for you and sometimes not. I just wish that Peter . . . oh well."

"Just wish that Peter what? This isn't a very supportive message. Is he always so harsh when you don't get a client?"

Natalie gave a brief bark of mirthless laughter. "This isn't very harsh, Barbara. This is gentle."

"Well, if this is gentle, I'll run and fix that coffee right away, 'cause you need it."

"Never mind, never mind. The kid from Marge and Lew's is coming up any minute. Take a seat, I'd rather talk and drink cardboard coffee and sit here and stare at that so-called architecture across the street one more minute . . . ugh!" she said, striking her forehead with the palm of her hand. "And that reminds me: speaking of architecture, it seems to me that I spoke 'way out of turn to that handsome husband of yours, right?"

Barbara peeled off her coat and sat down. Oh dear, she thought, I can't tell her how he reacted to her, not really. And besides, by the end of the evening he was more or less admitting that maybe he had been a little too quick to judge. "You have to know this about Mark," Barbara said, choosing her words with care. "He has a wonderful sense of humor and is really quite an easygoing guy; but when it comes to his profession, he . . . he tends to be . . . so committed and serious . . . Oh hell, Natalie, the truth is, when it comes to architecture . . . well, I love Mark madly and I wouldn't trade him for anyone else . . . but when it comes to his profession, he's stuffy and pompous and know-it-all." She laughed a bit nervously. Lord, the times she'd thought that about Mark and here she'd just blurted it out. That wasn't very loyal.

"I noticed that," Natalie said and smiled. "But he's so charming and after all, it *is* his business . . . I know I hate it when people carry on about advertising—"

"Which is exactly what he did," Barbara said.

Natalie grinned. It was the first real smile Barbara had seen this morning. "You know what, Barbara, you're right. The handsome bastard gave me a hard time about *my* profession—I'd forgotten that—and I was just giving him one back . . . wasn't I?"

"Don't you know?" Barbara laughed.

"To tell you the truth, Barbara, I'd had just a wee bit too much drinky-poo to remember every little detail. But I certainly didn't want to alienate your husband first crack out of the hat, because we're all becoming so fond of you around here. We don't want him telling you to leave us and go somewhere else."

"Oh, he's been fighting against my working since the day I first interviewed here . . . you know men. How they hate any kind of change—even a change for the better!"

"Don't I know it," said Natalie. She laughed shortly. "You know, I met my husband working here . . . oh yes. He was my copy chief. And yet, the day I announced that I was coming back here to work again, you know the first automatic words out of his mouth? 'Well, don't expect *me* to help around the house.' From the man who used to be my boss, mind you! And what's more," she rattled on, not giving Barbara the opportunity to comment, "he was still here! I mean, we were going to come to work together in the morning and more or less leave together at night . . . the family that writes copy together gets sloppy together, that sort of thing . . . and he was ignoring the reality of it all and just being a male chauvinist. I mean, nobody *asked* him to help, did they? Nobody suggested that his life change in any way whatsoever. All I said was that I was going back to work—in a capacity with which he was totally familiar—and that's what I got! So yeah, I know. They hate change, or even the suggestion that there might possibly, at some time in the dim or distant future, be the tiniest little . . . oh shit, you understand."

The two women sat back, each in her own chair, and smiled at each other.

"Is that what's bugging Peter Marcus, do you think?" Barbara asked, realizing in a flash of insight that, fifteen minutes ago, she wouldn't have felt comfortable asking Natalie this kind of question.

Natalie snorted, pushing herself up from her chair and pacing with quick strides. "Peter! How to explain Peter when I hardly understand him myself? Aside from the fact that he fires me once a month and then hires me back . . . oh yes, that's what he does, it's just one of his endearing

little games . . . he's, oh I don't know, temperamental is a good enough word, I suppose.

"Let me describe something for you. After I found this message"—she flourished the gray paper—"I hustled right over to his office. He's often here by seven A.M., you know. He was there, all right, sitting in his chair, twirling it back and forth—have you ever been in his office?—so you know that he sits up on a stage, enthroned in heaven. So there he was, like I say, swiveling in his chair, ears like a lynx because I didn't even say a word, and without turning around, without looking at me, with his back to me, he announced, 'When I feel like talking to you again, Natalie, I'll let you know.' "

There was a moment of silence. Then Barbara said, "That's it? That's all?

"That's it. That's all. I was dismissed."

"Doesn't it bother you, to have him act so—so—?"

"Nope. He's a genuine genius. What else can you expect? Daddy Marcus sent him to Groton, to Yale, and then to Israel. It addled his brain. He isn't quite sure who he's supposed to be, so he's settling for God."

"He sounds crazy."

"Oh no, not crazy . . . I'll go for eccentric . . ."

A voice from behind them in the doorway said: "Go for crazy, Nat. I think the boy wonder has finally done it . . ." It was Jake, a bit rumpled, his light blue eyes bleary with fatigue. "Quick, get me a chair someone, I need to collapse." And he flung himself into one of the wicker chairs. "Good morning, ladies. Oh God, isn't the coffee here yet?" And he moaned.

"Done what?" Natalie demanded. "What's Peter done now? Barbara told me last night that he had shanghaied you. I waited and waited in the Silver Streak—I was even late getting home for *me*—but you never showed, you rat."

Jake groaned again. "I showed—at eleven pip emma, my dear—and did away with an entire bottle of Bushmills, I think. And staggered across the street to the Alden—alone, I might add."

"Eleven o'clock! What the hell could he possibly need you that long for?"

"Would you believe the story of his sad and lonesome

childhood—which led inexorably to the loss of the Nature Boy account yesterday?"

"What?!"

"Yes, indeed. You see, Natalie, and you can listen too, beauteous Barbara, and learn . . . Here's how it goes. His mother had such a difficult time giving birth to him that she swore never to have another. Not only did this deprive Peter Marcus of his right to a sibling, but it warped his feelings toward women, making him incapable of a complete relationship with a person of the opposite sex and therefore clouding his judgment to such an extent that he entrusted this new presentation to you, I'm afraid, Nat."

Now Natalie groaned and pushed herself to her feet. "Oh shit . . . I knew he was mad at me, but not that mad . . ."

"Well, he is. You know how he can talk himself into a rage or a snit or a frenzy or a depression . . . Well, this was like that, only multiply it by one hundred. By the end, you were absolutely not to be trusted. He started by pacing and talking quietly and gradually worked himself into a shout. And then the clothes began to come off . . ."

"Off!" Barbara gasped.

"Well, kind of. First the jacket and then the vest and then the tie, then the shirt unbuttoned. Then it came off. And then the T-shirt. Each item carefully crumpled into a ball and flung at me . . ."

"Jesus, Jake, what did you do?"

"I'll tell you what I did. I caught them. I folded them all neatly and put them into a pile on the floor. And I listened. And I kept my mouth shut. He went on and on and on and on . . . And even when I said I had to leave, that somebody was waiting for me, that I had to go to the bathroom, he would only say, 'Not yet. I haven't finished yet what I have to say.' "

"Well, I know what I'd have done," Barbara said, aghast. "I'd have said, 'Excuse me please, but I'm leaving.' And then I'd have marched out. This sounds absolutely off-the-wall!"

"Well, yes, but if you knew Peter as long as we have, maybe it wouldn't seem *so* off-the-wall. Peter's always been

very dramatic. You have to remember, Barbara, Nattie and I came to work for his father. We remember Peter when he was learning the biz." Jake paused and then sighed heavily. "Jesus Christ, though, Nat, this is the first time he's ever locked the door."

"Oh shit."

"Yup. Locked me in. And did his diatribe on women."

"How'd you finally get loose?" Natalie said, pacing nervously around the room, plucking dead leaves off the plants and biting her lips.

"Well, around eleven, when he'd just about lost his voice, he put his head down on his arms on the desk for a few minutes. And when he lifted his head back up, he looked at me as if he had no idea what I was doing there and he said, 'What are you still doing here, Jake. Can't you see I need to be alone?' And, like the brave lickspittle that I am, I said, 'Yowza, yowza, boss," and got the hell out. And believe me, I needed that Bushmills—more than I've ever needed booze before in my life . . . where's that coffee? I need coffee . . . Anyway, Nat, I think it's time for you to do your usual Peter-feel-good number. Go and hold his hand or whatever it is you do in there that always calms him down . . ."

"Wrong," Natalie said. "I've been in there and got the grand view of his back . . ."

They looked at each other, Jake and Natalie, in silent communication. Barbara felt a bit strange. This entire conversation was making her uneasy. What was happening to her vision of M & M as a together place filled with together people, all easygoing and sophisticated and creative, doing exciting work and having fun the whole time? A mental image of suave Peter Marcus, always so impeccable and dapper, stripping off his clothes and ranting about women as he locked the door so Jake couldn't escape . . . well, it was creepy. She'd already seen him having a little snit—hadn't she been the one to take care of it and soothe him down?—but could Jake really be telling the truth? or maybe exaggerating a little to make a good story. She didn't like knowing so much about behind-the-scenes stuff . . . it made her uncomfortable. How could she face

Peter Marcus, the boss, the owner, the president of the firm, after hearing this kind of story about him? How could *they*, come to think of it?

"Well, it's a new wrinkle, the stripping of the clothes and the locking of the door," Natalie said to Jake. Their eyes were still locked on each other, thoughtfully; and her voice was thoughtful as well. "And since he's furious with me, I can't go in and make feel-goods . . ."

"So, okay, I get it," Jake said. "I'll go in there. But not before I've had my coffee!"

"Quite. And you'll give him the I-remember-your-father routine?"

"Yup. And a dash or two of yes-women-are-difficult with a sprinkle of remember-the-kibbutz . . . yeah, yeah, the whole thing I'll do, I'll make you proud of me, baby . . ."

As Barbara watched, Natalie gave him a smile of such melting warmth that she immediately felt shut out. Ah, so perhaps they weren't just old and dear friends . . . ! It might explain a lot of the code they seemed to talk with each other. But no! no! Her imagination was running away! Really, this whole thing was getting to her.

"Look, I'll go make some coffee—like I was going to when I first stopped by. If the kid from the deli shows up, just ignore those ugly styrofoam cups. I'll come back with the most delicious brew you've ever tasted . . ." And she hustled herself out, feeling as if she were babbling. They hardly noticed. Just when she had been feeling so close to Natalie. . . . As for Jake with his compliments and attentions—well, he'd forgotten she was there.

She knew what Mark would say if she expressed these feelings. "You're out there with the big kids, you have to stop getting your little sensitivities hurt all over the place." Well, maybe so, but there was something . . . something that wasn't quite right.

13 Marry Me!

"Marry me."

"What *for*?" Martha J unfolded her long legs and popped up into a sitting position on the sofa, surprised. She pulled back her head so she could get a good look at Calvin. They had been sitting very close to each other, studying an enormous pile of travel brochures he'd brought home, trying to plan their winter vacation. Was he kidding? He stared straight back at her, unsmiling, his eyes dead serious; and, as always when she looked into that face, that broad handsome brown-skinned face with its startling pale-green eyes, she felt a little rush in her chest.

"We've got such a good thing going for us," she said lightly. "Why mess it up with *marriage*?"

"Martha." The deep voice stayed mild, but a slight tinge of warning edged it. "I'm serious now."

She leaned over to plant a kiss on his cheek. "Honey, you always are."

"Now don't start in. I want to talk *very* seriously about getting married, Martha."

"And I repeat, what for? We've been living together for two years now. What's wrong suddenly?"

Calvin threw back his head and roared with laughter. "Wrong! You have to be the only woman in the world who would think a proposal of marriage means something's wrong!" He put a big warm hand on her shoulder, squeezing a little.

Martha shrugged away from his touch, nettled. "You know my feelings on the subject of marriage."

"Well, honey, I'm about to change your mind."

Calvin cleared his throat—a sure sign he was about to *expound* on a subject—and stretched himself out more comfortably. There was a lot of him to stretch out—he was 6'5", 230 pounds and every bit of it well, *nearly* every bit of it, muscle. Unlike a lot of former college athletes, Calvin hadn't allowed himself to get flabby. He worked out every morning at Vic Tanney's before the stock market opened; and he made sure to play several hours of tennis each week, no matter *what*. Sometimes it annoyed her because she never exercised if she could help it and didn't understand why he needed it, especially when it took him away from her. But what the hell, she thought, looking fondly at him, it kept his body in shape, and as long as his major accessory stood to attention and whistled *Yankee Doodle* every time she sashayed by, well . . . she had it good. Let the man have his say; she'd listen. But he wasn't going to change her mind. Marriage was not in the picture, period.

"Fire away," she said, rubbing one finger down the side of his face. "Let's hear your story, and *then* I'll say no."

Warning: "Martha Jane . . ."

"Okay, okay. Just funnin'."

"Martha, you couldn't be more right when you say we've got a good thing going—it couldn't be better. And you know me well enough to have guessed long before now that I want to marry you. I've been dropping enough hints."

"Like the time you showed me the bridal gowns in Bonwit's window? Some hint." She laughed.

"I'm thirty-two years old, and it's time I thought about settling down . . . You, too, in fact. You're thirty, you know . . ."

"I'm aware how *old* I am, Calvin . . ." Martha muttered; but he was really going now and couldn't be stopped.

"My parents keep asking what's going on, and I can't say that I blame them. I mean, it's taken long enough for them to accept our living together—"

Martha laughed. "*Accept*! Is that what you call it? Every time your mother phones you and I answer, she always pretends she has no idea who I am . . . just says, 'Calvin Spencer, please' in that Lady Dowager voice of hers . . . as

if I was the colored maid!" She had to laugh at his look of mingled agreement and consternation.

Mr. and Mrs. MacDowell C. Spencer were not easy. Pillars of the church, leaders in their community, she busy with all kinds of volunteer work, he sitting on this board and that, their pictures—broad fleshy well-fed faces, she with her gray hair lacquered into position, he with a hair-line mustache—appearing regularly in the *Amsterdam News* as they did one good work after another. There was a load of money there, old money, fourth-generation money from a very high class, very expensive funeral business. There was a beautiful town house in Harlem and a sprawling beach house out in Sag Harbor, Long Island. There were cars and servants and tight moral attitudes. Oh, there were times when she could well understand their being upset about Calvin and her. Calvin was their only son, their hope and their pride. And he'd always come through for them: honor student, scholarship winner, top athlete in college, serious MBA scholar, and now one of Merrill Lynch's top account execs, probably heading for a vice-presidency one of these days. Thirty-two years old, handsome, successful, respected. And instead of settling into a big house in the suburbs and raising two or three superior children with some superior lady or another, he insisted upon an irregular relationship with a poor girl with no discernible background, no discernible wealth, a woman with bizarre tastes in dress and career, who didn't want marriage or kids or the country club and membership in all the 'right' charities. Yes, they had every reason to be perturbed.

But Calvin didn't like admitting how uptight his parents were about her. He didn't like to think of how rigid they were. Well, he was somewhat uptight about it himself—something else he didn't relish facing. He was such a middle-class, straight-arrow type in some ways. But lovable. Oh my, yes.

"This is not a joke, Martha. I wish you'd try to be serious for once. Just for five minutes, okay? Okay. I do think we have to consider my parents' feelings in this matter. Family is very important to me, as I *know* it is to you . . ."

Martha nodded. Yes, of course he knew. Her family, though, was more than just important to her. Her family had been the overriding concern in her life. Her mama had been widowed when Martha was only 12, and Mama having to go to work, Martha had to become mother to her three little sisters: Charlene, Velma, and Bobbie. Mama had been fiercely determined that her working and being away wouldn't change anything basic.

"You keep an eye on them while I'm gone, Martha J, you hear me?" she ordered. "You make sure they do their homework and if they don't behave, you report to me and I'll whomp them. You hear, you girls? Everyone comes home right after school, no excuses, no alibis. Everyone does her housework and then everyone does her homework and then everyone helps with the supper."

And everyone did—because you just naturally tended to do whatever Louise Jones told you to. Small and slight though she was—Martha had inherited the Indian cast of feature, the narrow bones, and the copper-colored skin from Mama—there was a core of iron to her.

Privately, Mama said to her, "We're not going to get stuck in the welfare rut, Martha, not us! We're going to make it. And you know how we're going to do it? By going to school. Every last one of you is going to graduate high school, for sure. You're all smart and you're all pretty, so there's no reason you can't just go out there into the business world and make it on your own." Mama always felt frustrated that she couldn't get a good job, that she was stuck in that black-female dead end—housework or factory work, take your choice. She chose not to go to the factory —their neighbor Jessie had lost three fingers in one of the machines. "Not me," she declared, "I want to go to my grave with everything I was born with."

Louise Jones made sure she baked twice a week, so there was always something delicious around that Mama had made. And birthdays were always special. And Christmas—! Poor as they were, she managed to make Christmas a magic day with many gaily wrapped (but not expensive) presents, a lot of homemade gifts and decorations, and a mammoth, fantastic dinner with all the relatives invited and everybody coming in with smiles and a favorite dish of

some kind. Oh, those Christmases! Mama always had a way to make things glow.

And now Mama was getting *her* fondest, secret wish. At age 46 she'd finished high school and was now enrolled at the College of Nursing at Downstate Medical Center. *All* the Jones women were going to be college-educated.

Now Cal was drawing one of his famous deep breaths as he paused in the careful presentation of his case. She interrupted quickly . . . "Honey, I know, I know, we love each other dearly and marriage is a commitment and we know for sure we can live together without killing each other and all. But, I have financial obligations . . ."

"Bull*shit*!" he exploded. "I've been hearing about those sisters and the Jones Girls College Fund for four years. But hell, woman, Bobbie will graduate this June, remember? After that, I declare the College Fund closed."

"You're forgetting Louise Jones."

Calvin laughed. "Forget Louise Jones? You gotta be kiddin'. The most unforgettable woman in the world, otherwise known as Big Mama? And anyway—" abruptly sobering—"I told you, *I'll* take care of the rest of her schooling."

Martha tightened her lips and shook her head. "We don't do things that way and you know it. I did it for the rest of them, I'm going to do it for Mama."

"Oh yeah? Well, it might interest you to know that when I asked Louise Jones for your hand in marriage and told her I'd be taking over the College Fund, she didn't have a single objection. She said *fine*, is what *she* said. Actually, what she said was, 'Good, it's about time that wild Indian settled herself down with a good man like you.' "

"You . . . *what*! You asked . . . you *what* . . . you went behind my back . . . my mama . . . you, you *what*—?" She leaped to her feet and stood over him as he sprawled lazily across the couch, hands on her hips, helplessly spluttering. The nerve of him, going behind her back. "I knew you were old-fashioned, Calvin Spencer, but I swear, you're positively Neanderthal!"

"I don't care how old-fashioned you think I am, right is right and wrong is wrong."

"You trying to tell me that our living together is *wrong*?"

"No. But I'm trying to tell you that when two people belong together, they ought to make that final commitment. And if they don't, then *that's* wrong."

Martha paced the room, trying not to look at him. Looking at him tended to make her melt: that was in the second place. And in the first place, she was angry and she didn't want to lose her temper with him. She wanted to *discuss* this and stay all nice and friendly; she didn't want to start yelling. He had a habit of removing himself from any direct confrontation that was louder than a calm conversational level. She hated it: the last time, he'd disappeared until 2:00 in the morning; she was frantic by the time he unlocked the door. And where had he been? Out in Queens at a driving range! Hitting golf balls! In the rain! Typical Calvin.

"Listen, Calvin, please. You know I love you. I *love* you. But my career is important. It's my major commitment. You know that. You knew it when you met me."

"I'm not asking you to quit your job or anything."

"Job! Calvin, that's what I'm talking about. It's not just a job, it's a career, and I'm finally moving in the direction I want. Can't you understand how important this is to me? Nat Simon has given me the chance of a lifetime . . ."

"Nat Simon, Nat Simon . . . don't you think it's time to stop hero-worshiping that woman? She's only a human being, not Wonder Woman, you know. And anyway, Martha, don't you think it's time you stopped using *white* women as role models?"

Martha became terribly upset. For an instant, she thought her heart might have stopped beating, she felt so stilled.

Finally, in an exhausted voice she said: "I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that."

"Oh come on, Martha honey, you know I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

"I don't know a fucking thing except that Natalie Simon doesn't care what color *I* am . . ."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I like Natalie just fine and I know she gave you a terrific break. But a white woman can never—"

"You stop right there. It just so happens that every person besides Mama who's pushed me along the right road has been a woman *and* white . . ."

Miss Fink, her English teacher in high school, had been the first one. She gave Martha extra books to read and paid particular attention to her compositions. "You write very well, Miss Jones," she said in that funny, pedantic way she had. Ah, Miss Fink, with her sandals and her homespun skirts and huge handmade dangle earrings and bad skin! What a good person. Every kid in that classroom knew that she cared about them; she wasn't just doing the minimum and collecting her paycheck. "Have you ever thought of a career in writing?" Miss Fink had asked her, and the young skinny Martha with her painfully straightened hair had stared at her and laughed. Miss Fink didn't crack even a smile, but said very solemnly: "What are your plans then for your life?" So she answered seriously. "I'm taking typing and shorthand, and I plan to be a private secretary."

Miss Fink stared at her thoughtfully for a few moments and then licked her lips and said, "That's nice, Martha, but I think you could do very well in college. What do you think of that?"

"College! Oh, I could never go to college."

And then Miss Fink talked and talked and talked to her. If you came right down to it, Miss Loretta Fink talked Miss Martha J Jones into Brooklyn College, into a scholarship, into a part-time secretarial job with her boyfriend's law firm, and into a whole new life.

After Miss Fink, there was Professor Jordana Mann at Brooklyn College, who taught advanced composition-creative writing and who convinced Martha J Jones that she could probably earn her living writing. Of course, Professor Mann meant The Great American Novel or Short Story or something like that, whereas Miss Martha J Jones knew exactly what she was going to do. She was going to be a big-time advertising copywriter on Madison Avenue and make big, fat, beautiful bucks. Advertising was where all the money was and wherever all the money was, she

promised herself, would be the place where Martha J Jones ended up.

". . . So," she finished, glaring at Cal, "kindly keep those white-woman remarks to yourself. I owe a lot to those women; without them, I'd be pounding a typewriter somewhere in some city agency, earning the barest minimum, and I certainly wouldn't be the smartass, foxy lady you keep *saying* you love so much! You tell me the truth, Calvin Spencer, if I was some little secretary or clerk-typist somewhere, would you be living with me right now?"

Calvin pushed himself up and strode over to her, scooping her into his muscular embrace. Without thinking, she leaned into his hard chest and thighs, sniffing in the good lemony smell of him, her arms going up around his neck, her senses swimming. He bent his head and with his lips right against her neck, murmured, "We'll never know, will we?" Automatically, her lips moved to meet his and she lost herself in his kiss.

"Marry me," he whispered against her mouth.

"Not fair, Calvin . . . I can't think . . ."

His tongue licked her lips and he repeated, "Marry me."

Martha pressed her body up against his, loving the familiar excitement she could feel building up. It never failed. All he had to do, really, was put his hands on her and she was completely incapable of rational thought. Well, *almost* completely. A small portion of her brain was busily ticking away, saying Martha you dope, why *don't* you marry him? Why are you fighting it so hard? You love him, you idiot! You want him to leave and leave for good? You want him to go find some other lady and fall in love with *her* and nibble like that on *her* lower lip and put his big warm hand like that on *her* rear end and push his hips like that into *hers*—? Hell *no*! In a surge of ardor, she tightened her arms around his neck as if to hold him fast.

He was so good, he was so sweet. Where would she ever find another man as bright and reliable and straight-arrow and steady and . . . the little thought nipped at her and she thrust it out of sight . . . *rich.* But wouldn't it be nice to be secure for the rest of your life—even if you made it in the

world of advertising a thousand times over, wouldn't it be nice to know there was a cushion. Nice for Mama, she'd never have to worry about Mama again, ever.

I'll marry you, I'll marry you, she thought, but I don't think I'll tell you quite yet. No, there were a few things she'd have to do before she opened her mouth and committed herself to one man and one future. And started being faithful.

Jake Miller, for instance. She'd been telling him and telling him—"I don't go for white meat, baby"—but nothing seemed to faze that Jake. Nothing seemed to turn him off or convince him he ought to stop coming *on* to her.

And he was so damn cute, that Jake, so different from your run-of-the-mill pompously bright ad executive in that mostly white, mainly male world there on Madison Avenue. So different, for instance, from that phony preppie Jeff Lawrence. He made her laugh, did Jake, something very few men in her life had ever been able to do . . . had ever *tried* to do, come down to it. Life for black men was just too damned serious. It might be fun to get into bed and do it for laughs. And, let's be honest about it, Martha baby, there was something about him that appealed. She'd never gone to bed with a white man; she was against the whole idea. Like to like, that was the way, if you didn't want big trouble in your life. Stick with your own kind and if you got hurt, well, at least it was a *familiar* pain.

But, yes, before she said anything too definite to Calvin, she'd really have to take herself out and finish up her little pieces of unfinished business. Jake, baby, ole massa, you is in for one helluva surprise.

"Marry me," Calvin was insisting, putting his hands on all the places she liked and making her moan. "Come on now, honey, it only takes one little word and it's not a secret word either."

Oh yes, she loved him, loved his hands and his mouth and his big padded body, loved his intelligence and all of his straight-arrow dependability. He pressed her lips in close to his and she nearly stopped thinking altogether. "Marry me," he murmured into her ear.

"If I don't marry *you*," she said breathlessly, "I won't marry anyone."

His eyes, she noted swimmingly, had changed to that smoky gray color they always got when he was hot. She lifted her mouth to his, letting her eyes drift closed, all thoughts of anyone else or anything else or anywhere else just melting away into nothingness.

14 Happy Birthday to You

"*Surprise! ! ! ! !*"

The lights came on in a startling blaze, glinting off the giant mirrored letters—HAPPY B'DAY, MOM—strung all across one paneled wall of the board room: the other walls were literally covered with huge Day-glo balloons, and someone had managed to hang a mirrored dance-hall ball from the modern chrome chandelier in the center of the ceiling.

"Oh, *shit*!"

Natalie stood blinking and scowling as the assemblage shouted along with Jake at the upright piano in a highly dissonant rendition of "Happy birthday to you." As they sang, she quickly scanned the group. Everyone was there who counted in her life: Jake, of course, and Martha J and Jeff and Millard and Barbara and Tommy Thoms and Peter and all the secretaries and Roy the art director and his guys, a couple of the time buyers she liked, and Mary-Claire and the librarian, Joanna, and Marian Rutledge (Who invited her, for Christ's sake?) and . . . well, everybody, really, who knew her well and wished her well. They all looked so smug and pleased with themselves. As well they might: she hadn't had an *inkling*. Well, last night

Jerry and Melissa had presented her with a homemade dinner and lopsided cake and a tiny, ladylike watch encircled with diamonds: very expensive probably, and she hated it. It wasn't her type at all. Why was it that Jerry could live with her for so many years and still not have the least idea of her taste. But, in any case, she had thought that was *that*. End of birthday. And now—damn Jerry, he *promised*. She tried to find him among the grinning faces but couldn't.

"How old are you now, how old are you now . . ." they all sang, the rotten finks. And then stopped and looked at her, expectantly.

Natalie drew in a breath and gazed around the room. Then she said, "Okay. Whose idea was this? Debbie: you're fired. Jake: you're through. Peter: you weren't speaking to me three days ago . . . I'm not talking to you now. Millard: may your blender break down forever. And as for my husband, wherever you are, Jerry: I'll get you for this. And for those of you who really wanted to know: I'm thirty-nine and holding." There was general laughter, and then Peter came up and gave her a big hug and bit her neck.

"Peter!" she protested, but he was already gone and there was Debbie with a big package from Bendel's. "Oh Debbie, is that for *moi*? I'm supposed to open it now? Okay."

Everyone was talking at once now, but they all stood waiting for her reaction. What darling people, what a wonderful group. She bent to the box, ripping the glossy paper and flinging it up in the air. Beneath the layers of tissue was something soft, in melting pastel colors, melting to the touch. She lifted it out, a large triangular shawl. "Oh kiddies! My wonderful kiddies! Oh, it is heavenly . . . what is it? Cashmere? Butter? Clouds?" She tied it around her shoulders and pirouetted. "Oh, you do spoil me and I *love* it. Bless you all and for God's sake, someone get me a drink."

A glass appeared almost instantly, filled to the brim. "What is it? Gin? The whole thing is gin? Well, okay, just so long as nobody expects me to chugalug." And she took a healthy swallow.

"Naughty girl," said Peter, stepping forward again. "You've spoiled my big moment . . . Everyone! Attention! I wish to toast Natalie."

"Your wish is our command, Peter," Jake laughed. They all raised their glasses, waiting. It had become so quiet so suddenly that Natalie could hear the hum of traffic far below on Madison Avenue. What was he up to? she wondered. He'd been so erratic lately . . . He wouldn't make her a VP here and now, would he? Her heart speeded up a little at the thought. No, no of course not. It hadn't been mentioned for almost a year. Peter was capable of *anything* . . . but no.

"To darling Natalie," Peter crooned, "the irresistible, irreplaceable Natalie Simon, who is going to be—" He paused and grinned at her and her heart began to thump wildly. "One of these days," he continued, grinning even more wickedly. Oh that bastard, he knew exactly what he was doing. "Who is going to be, one of these days, if she behaves . . . our newest vice-president!"

Her crew cheered, of course they would, weren't they her very own kiddies? But what had he said, after all? Nothing. And now she caught sight of Jerry, raising his glass and smiling sweetly at her. Natalie stared at him. It had been a long time since she had really seen him at a distance like this. He was always either across the table from her or sitting at his desk. But there he stood: her husband. My husband, she said to herself, trying the words out in her mind. My husband. They meant nothing, it was like saying two foreign words. Strange . . . she sipped at the gin slowly, studying him. Yes, the same man she had met all those years ago at that interview. More thickened now, more . . . substantial. And there was gray sprinkled through his thick dark hair. He didn't look his age at first glance; but she could see the changes. The pouches under his eyes and the extra lines bracketing his mouth. The softness under the jaw. Was he good-looking? Once she had thought so. Once she had thought well enough of the way he looked to take him away from his wife. Now? Now, when she looked at him, she saw softness, softness.

Now he came up to her and put an arm tenderly about her shoulders. He bent his head and she dutifully lifted her

lips for a kiss and once again, everybody in the room applauded and cheered and laughed. "Yay, Jerry! hasn't lost his touch!" Oh, hasn't he, Natalie thought bitterly. If any of them knew . . . it made her laugh. They all saw Beloved Old Pro from the Shop. He had been well loved . . . that was a laugh, too, because hadn't she been one of those who loved him well? One of his kiddies in fact? Now he stood next to her, squeezing her shoulder and talking with Peter; she supposed that they looked like a nice happy couple, the small, slender dark-haired woman, animated and vivacious with her large, shambling big bear of a husband, sweet and calm and gentle. Ha! How long had it been?—two months? More?—since they had last had any sex? And then only because she had said, "Do you know how long it's been since we've made love?" It was a line that never failed to make him feel guilty enough to roll over and start. And so he had, and as usual she wondered at the end why she had even bothered. Had it even taken five minutes? And then he rolled off and fell asleep. As usual. Leaving her wide awake, fuming and horny as hell. Come to think of it, it had been over a week since she and Jake . . . her eyes sought him out. If he was with Barbara Valentine again . . . but he was seated at the piano, looking straight at her, and Barbara was nowhere near. He gave Natalie a big wink, and she relaxed instantly.

"I guess this man," she announced, "is one of those people who need no introduction. Nevertheless: let me introduce him, the man who was always known as Big Daddy in M & M's copy department . . . the man who for years trained every aspiring young writer who came here . . . the man who in fact was my first boss and then . . . my husband, Jerry Weber!"

There was more applause, but as she looked around the room, Natalie realized that most of the kiddies here tonight didn't even work here when Jerry Weber was the King of the Eleventh Floor. They were being polite, but they had no memories of him. Just her and Peter and Millard and Marian Rutledge and Jake . . . oh yes, Tommy and a couple others. But essentially, he was becoming a stranger here, in the place he'd given so many years of his life to. It

was here that he'd met her and it was here, in this very board room, that she'd first put her arms around his neck and given him the kiss that started the whole thing. Of course, the room looked different then, because Peter's father was in charge: but it seemed to her that they were standing on the very spot. She looked up at Jerry, smiling, wondering if he was remembering. But he was chatting animatedly, facing away from her and, even as she turned to him, he let his hand slip off her shoulder and turned his attention to Marian Rutledge.

It wasn't that she disliked Marian Rutledge, not at all. But she could never find anything to say to her. Marian was a small and sturdy WASP lady of indeterminate age. Fifty-five? Sixty? It was hard to tell. That narrow-lipped face had never worn much makeup, and it didn't now. Sun-squint crinkles radiated from the eyes; otherwise, no signs of age. Sturdy was the perfect word for Marian. You knew that if you ever managed to strip the Chanel suits and ladylike white silk blouses from her body, you would find not a naked body but tennis whites: a polo shirt covering knobby little breasts and flippy little skirt over tight thighs. Tonight Marian wore a navy-blue suit and sensible blue shoes. She wasn't even flirting with Jerry, just honestly glad to see him, the homely snub-nosed face beaming with sincerity. Or maybe that was Marian's way of flirting. It was hard to figure a woman like that. Natalie found it hard to figure anyone who seemed neuter. She didn't even know where to start. If you didn't respond sexually to life, what was there?

In fact, she thought, Marian and Jerry made a perfect pair. He, soft and blobby; she, small and rock-hard. She shivered slightly. If I had to be stuck with one man on a desert island, it certainly wouldn't be my husband . . . I'd rather have Millard, she thought, smiling to herself. I'll bet I could turn him around if I had to, and even make him like it. But even if she couldn't, if there wasn't any sex, well, that wasn't so very different than the way she was living with Jerry. Besides, Millard was witty and amusing and he'd do all the cooking. No, on a desert isle, even a man like the chef was a better bet than Jerry Weber.

* * *

I guess it's a new generation, Jerry thought, looking around the room. He knew only a few faces; yet it hadn't been all that long since he'd left the agency . . . what? Seven, eight years? Just eight years, not such a long time, and Marian was the only one left of all his old buddies. Old Man Marcus was dead and Morrisey they said only appeared from Miami on state occasions. And what was more unbelievable—for him, at least—was Peter Marcus. Peter Marcus, president of the agency with his silvery hair and eccentricities—when Jerry had first begun writing industrial copy for International Paper, Peter Marcus was a small boy running around making a pest of himself! Incredible!

It was good, talking to Marian. She'd been here when he was first hired. In fact, she'd showed him around. Of course, things were a bit different then, and she was the only female copywriter in the place. She was never a beauty, poor Marian, but a damned nice gal. He liked her. Fran had liked her, too, and she came over a lot of evenings for drinks and dinner with them. Well, it was natural because then, they had all lived in small apartments on West 69th Street. And of course, there were no children. They tried, he and Fran, but it just never happened. Marian still saw Fran. He looked over at Marian, who was getting them each a fresh drink. From the neck down, she looked exactly the same as she had 18 years ago. But her face . . . Well, they had all aged. Most of the faces in the room, all these new faces, looked like babies to him. He smiled to himself; wasn't that a sure sign of middle age? When everyone began looking terribly, terribly young? Well then, he was middle-aged, and what was wrong with that? Everyone was trying too damn hard to be 21 forever, from what he could see. You could at least have a real conversation with Marian Rutledge, talk business and get some sense out of her. She wasn't trying to impress anybody. She was absolutely straight-arrow, was Marian, trustworthy and dependable. You didn't find many like her in this crazy business. And it was getting crazier all the time. Peter specialized in keeping you off balance all the

time; that was no way to do business. To do business, you had to play it straight from the shoulder. Peter's father knew all that. Old Man Marcus knew all the tricks, but they were constructive tricks. He had taught Jerry to always keep his office door open. It was Peter's father who began the breakfast-meeting routine . . . he always said it made everyone look forward to coming into the office and in the meantime, if you were the boss, you got a chance to look everyone over and find out what their mood was that day. Smart. It was smart stuff. It was tricky, but it was tricky in a nice way somehow. Not like Peter who, Jerry felt, just loved to catch you up. There was a triumphant smile Peter was apt to get that made you feel patronized. Yes, he'd made the right move, getting out of M & M when he did. He wouldn't like to have to deal with Peter every day. The stories Natalie came home with sometimes just made him sick! She said she considered Peter Marcus a challenge and she laughed, but he knew it bothered her. Whenever she had to have three drinks before they could sit down to dinner, he knew he'd soon hear about a Peter Marcus Major Mood.

He himself had always had breakfast meetings every morning. When he was copy chief, with seven writers under him, they had all checked in with him before starting work. Papa Bear they called him, behind his back of course; but it pleased him. Old Man Marcus was right, of course, it was a very pleasant way to start the workday; and furthermore, he often learned a lot more that was important while eating Danish with his group than in the more formal meetings later on in the day. But it was such hard work. They all really expected him to be a big daddy to them, to help them with their copy and with their personal lives and with the office politics.

He was a solitary man; it didn't come naturally to him the way it did to Marcus. But that was the way he had been taught and it worked fine, so he did it. But he never could have kept it up if Marian Rutledge hadn't been there every morning. Say what you would about Marian—all right, she wasn't the most creative, most scintillating, wittiest person in the world, as Natalie was quick to point out

at every opportunity—she was energetic and she was decent and she used to take over a lot of the niggling problems the kids thought were so important. He couldn't tell a young buck what to do about some woman who was trying to get him to marry her! He was no good at Dear Abbying. He found it boring. But Marian seemed to enjoy it all; but of course, she was a woman and women always loved that kind of stuff. And Marian being the only female copywriter in the place . . . well, they all just tended to come to her, after a while.

Poor Marian, when he hired Natalie Simon that was the end of her reign. Natalie had a way of attracting male attention wherever she went. Not that she was a beauty, exactly, but there was something . . . glamorous about her. That day when she walked into his office with her portfolio, in that Russian-style dress of hers, buttoned up to the throat and down to the wrists but with the skirt halfway up her thighs—well, they were all wearing them that way then; it was the day of the miniskirt—but still, on Natalie with that air about her, it looked blatant. His first thought was no. Don't hire her. She'll only be trouble.

But then she sat down, and he didn't have to look at anything but her face and she changed his mind in about five and a half minutes. She was bright, she was determined, she was spunky, and she obviously wanted the job with a kind of desperation. Her samples from Sears were fine, and quite a few of them showed that special spark. And those big round eyes kept looking at him with awe and wonderment. He could tell that she was mightily impressed and just realizing that gave him a sense of himself, sitting in this very nice office with young men coming in and out all the time, being deferential. She actually made him aware, for the first time in a long time, of where and who he was. He was a copy chief in a good Madison Avenue ad agency. Natalie Simon, without a word, made him feel keenly that he was really in a glamor business . . . that, indeed, he was a glamorous figure as far as she was concerned.

It was wonderful, feeling glamorous. He could remember, even today, how the young and eager job-hunting

Natalie Simon had affected him that morning in 1966. A far cry from Papa Bear!

After she came to work for M & M, everything became different—starting with the breakfast meetings. All of the young men in the group felt the same magnetism he did. The wonder of it, the miracle of it, was that Natalie Simon preferred *him*—sat next to *him*, talked to *him*, looked at *him*. Marian's grim prediction after Natalie's first day, that she would stir up the boys, proved untrue. She soon became pals with Jake Miller—in a way, they were two of a kind—and was friendly with a couple of the other writers, but there was no fooling around. He'd have known. That sort of thing only started when she came back to work after Melissa. Back then, she only had eyes for him, for Jerry Weber.

She made him young again! Every morning he looked forward to seeing her. Just seeing her, just exchanging a few words over donuts and coffee could make him feel light and witty and sparkling. She brought out the funny in him. He would find himself practicing witty lines, storing up amusing incidents, saving all of it for the next time he saw her.

How different from his evenings with Fran when, after dinner (which was always meat and potatoes and a veg, totally predicable and always served at 6:45 precisely) they would then chat a bit about what they had done at work that day—Fran was an executive secretary and probably a good one, he didn't know; but from her tales, nothing very exciting ever happened on the job, unless you counted the lost plane tickets or the day the thousands of tiny baby cockroaches invaded the executive offices—and then they would each settle down with a book or something, and that was their evening. Fran wasn't much of a one for going out. The theater bored her; concerts put her to sleep; museums were for Sunday afternoon; and cocktail parties were tiresome. She'd go to a movie now and again, but her favorite occupation was puttering around the house, potting plants, perusing her vast collection of antique buttons, or needlepointing. They had met and married each other in their late twenties and she loved telling

people how lucky they had been to find each other before it was too late. Fran dearly loved being married. She was all settled in, 20 pounds overweight, comfortable, and contented. And, in fact, he had to admit, so was he.

But contented and comfortable were not nearly enough in the face of the promise that was Natalie Simon: young and tight-bodied, vivacious and sexy. Sexy! He thought his interest in that had long faded away. He and Fran, at 40, were no longer indulging. They had been physically attracted to each other when they first met, but it soon died.

He lusted after Natalie Simon, a secret he kept buried in the depths of his heart. But he never would have actually had the nerve to touch her. And that was the miracle of Natalie; he didn't have to. She came after him. It was like having your favorite fantasy come true, before your eyes and beyond your dreams.

It happened right here in this room, probably not two feet from where he was standing right this moment. It had been late in the afternoon, maybe even after 5:00. Very few people were around. He and Natalie were setting up the big table for a luncheon meeting with a new client the next day, discussing their presentation, the best strategy to use with a bunch of engineers, and putting out all the necessary tape recorders and water carafes and pads and pencils. It was an important new client—major appliances that would bring in several million a year—and he wanted to do everything himself, to make sure it was done just right. Or maybe he just wanted an excuse to be alone with Natalie Simon; after all these years, he still wasn't sure. God knows he didn't really need to be there; she could have done it herself. But, anyway, there he was, excitement fizzing in his veins like champagne, because it was growing dark outside and he was still with her and she seemed to glitter with some sort of secret anticipation. The air in the board room seemed charged . . . or maybe he only remembered it that way. Because suddenly, without warning, as he handed her a list of some kind, she stood close to him, went on tiptoe, and kissed him open-mouthed, her arms around his neck. The smell of her was intoxicating, the taste of her was heady wine, and he was instantly erect

. . . something that had not happened to him in so long, he had almost forgotten what it felt like.

It was an endless kiss, to which he responded ardently without ever quite being able to believe it was really happening. He remembered saying to himself, I'm dreaming, I must be dreaming, even as he wrapped his arms around her narrow back, reveling in her firm, shapely body.

When she finally drew away from him, she pressed her cheek to his, murmuring, "I'm sorry, Jerry, I'm sorry but I just couldn't stand it anymore." Ten minutes later, to his everlasting surprise, they were in a room at the Alden Hotel, making love. She was so marvelous that time, so sweet, so giving, so accepting. He felt as if he could go on forever; no woman had ever enjoyed it so much with him, not in his whole life. What a session that was! Of course it couldn't last on that ecstatic level, not for long, but it had been fine, no matter what she liked to think, it had been damned fine, much better than anything he and Fran had ever known, for God's sake! Why she had to find fault with every little thing, he was sure he didn't know. What the hell did the woman want? He was only human, after all. Desire always died away, with every married couple. It was only human.

It was her working, he was sure of it. If you traced back the graph of their marriage, he was positive that the sexual curve began going down at the moment she decided to go back to work. At first, it made a wonderful difference. She stopped grousing so much about being stuck at home all day, and she became much more attentive to Melissa. They walked to and from work together, at least until she became too busy and had to work late several days a week. He hardly saw her in the office; she was working on entirely different accounts, and within the year she was assistant group supervisor and then he never saw her at all. One evening, at dinner, she said suddenly, "Jerry, you keep talking about being your own boss, about freelancing. Why don't you leave M & M and give it a whirl?" And so he did, after thinking it over carefully. "What the hell," Natalie told him, "I'm making enough, so even if you flop, it'll be okay. But you won't flop, Jer, 'cause you're good." What a woman. She wasn't perfect, she was sometimes a pain in

the neck and she could be terribly bitchy. But when push came to shove, she was in his corner. And, even more important, they had Melissa. The long-hoped-for child of his loins, the proof of his manhood, his immortality, his darling daughter.

And that's why their marriage was going to last forever. As he often told her, "Hell, Natalie, I know it's far from perfect, I know we have our moments of disagreement . . . but our marriage is much better than most. Hell, we're together, aren't we?"

Natalie looked around the room. Where was Jake? It was her birthday party, he should be right here, by her side, making funny comments about everybody and everything. She sipped at her drink, then made a face as she realized the glass was empty. Where the *hell* was Jake? If he was paying court—again—to Barbara Valentine, she'd kill him. After all these years of being lovers . . . of being *friends* . . . of frolicking about in bed together . . . no, he couldn't just turn it all off that quickly. Barbara was lovely-looking and stately and blond and all the things Jake yearned after—what nice Jewish boy from the Bronx didn't?—but . . . she'd kill him. The next time he waggled those pixie eyebrows at her and thrust out his thumb in the direction of the hotel, she'd just pretend she didn't get it. He'd learn: he couldn't jerk her around like this. Where *was* he? She needed him, dammit. She was the goddam guest of honor, wasn't she? And here she was, standing alone. Of course, she could always stroll over to her husband. But he was having such a lovely fucking time with Marian Rutledge . . . and then she had to laugh. Because her husband hadn't had a lovely fucking time with anyone since the dinosaurs disappeared from the face of the earth. Her husband was incapable these days of getting it up, keeping it up, or using it up. Oh hell. She didn't care, really, she had Jake plus any other goodies that came along. Anyway she was *supposed* to have Jake. And she was *supposed* to have Jerry, as a real husband, and that hadn't been true for a helluva long time.

She took herself over to the impromptu bar and poured herself a liberal shot, gulping it down and pouring herself

another. Much better. She looked across the room, surveying the scene. What funny-looking creatures human beings were, all different colors and sizes and shapes. She stared at Jerry, big and bulky and shambling, and felt nothing, not even disinterest. Yet once, just a few short years ago, she had found him amiable, mature, and utterly fascinating. If she strained her memory, she could remember just adoring the ground he walked on. Big, solid, substantial Jerry Weber. Her boss. The copy chief. An Older Man. So smart, so knowledgeable, so talented, so calm, so self-assured. The day—right here in this board room, wasn't it?—she flung herself on him and gave him a big smooch, she had really believed that he'd pull away, pat her on the head and say, "Now, now, little Natalie, I am a happily married man and you are just an infatuated child." That's what Professor Michaels had said when she kissed *him*, her junior year in college.

But Jerry, it seemed, had been taken with her! She could hardly take it in . . . it was unbelievable, and then it was beautiful and gorgeous and absolutely incredible! He clutched her closer and held her tighter and kissed her again and again. He was so excited, and for her it was doubly exciting because never in this world had she imagined that he thought of her as anything but his newest, greenest kid copywriter. What a coup! This grown-up man, so giving, so caring . . . What a contrast to Eli, her most recent beau, that selfish baby who was more interested in building up his body in that gym than in spending time with her, and the creep still owed her 50 bucks and she hadn't even heard from him in three weeks! Jake was fun, but he was just a friend. She couldn't imagine going to bed with him: she'd giggle. But Jerry Weber—! He was a *real* man, a real grown-up man.

When he made love to her that evening, there were tears in his eyes. She had never been so touched in her entire life. She couldn't get over it; this man, whom she had loved from a distance for so long, this creature of her fantasies, was actually, really, and truly lying over her, his face twisted with passion, making love to her and whispering, "You're beautiful, you're beautiful." It was too good to be true!

Jerry Weber had never been a truly inventive lover, as far as she could remember. But she had been so in love with the idea of Jerry loving her that it was all roses and misty rainbows and the thrill of it all. She couldn't believe her luck. How many young career girls in New York almost immediately fell into a love affair with their boss? It was the stuff fantasies are made of. A *real* love affair, not some sleazy little joke. He was in love with her and she, she firmly believed, was in love with him.

For six months, they snatched the odd moment here and the wicked weekend in Atlantic City there, and it was truly thrilling. She was so proud of being seen with him; he made her feel fragile, feminine, and irresistible. And then, that fateful Tuesday he asked her to stay after work and instead of heading over to the Alden, he cleared his throat nervously, pacing back and forth behind his desk, looking very serious, and blurted out: "I've left Fran."

She stared at him, startled. "What?"

"I've left my wife. I've left Fran. I'm getting a divorce."

"But Jerry . . . *why*?"

"Why? *Why*???" He ran his fingers through his hair in an agitated manner. "Why do you think? So we can get married!"

"Married!" She could feel the blood drain away from her face, leaving her with a cold, numb feeling. Married! Her plans for the future did not include being married to Jerry Weber. What *was* the man talking about?

Now he raced from behind the desk and threw his arms around her unresisting body. "I love you, Natalie, you've made me young again. We'll get married and have babies and travel to Italy and lie naked on the beach at the Lido and have a wonderful West Side apartment with high ceilings and parqueted floors and lots of rooms with lots of windows, and we'll have parties and conversation and we'll dance on the roof . . ." As he went on, she began to paint the picture in her head: the big rambling apartment, the white walls, the paintings, the plants, the modern furniture, the sunlight coming in the windows . . . she even got a vague image of plump babies cooing and dimpled and smelling of talcum powder.

He had sold her. Jerry Weber, late on a Tuesday afternoon, had sold her on a mirage called *Our Life Together, Married.* And she had bought it, just as if it were real. And every time before the wedding that doubts assailed her, she would think: How can I back out, after he left his wife and everything?

Sighing heavily, she brought herself back out of the past and, lifting her glass to her lips, discovered it was empty. Again? No, she decided, no more right now. She'd had enough. More than enough, really.

I'm drinking too much, Barbara scolded herself as she poured the wine into her glass. It was her fourth, or maybe her fifth, and she wasn't even slightly dizzy. In fact, only now was she beginning to feel that little glow. She felt a teeny bit guilty for eavesdropping on Debbie and Mary-Claire; but she couldn't help it, it was fascinating. She'd never been single at their age. At their age, she'd probably already had Jennifer and was playing her proper part of Young Wife and Mother with Responsibilities in Life. Putting on weight, thickening around the waist, becoming stodgy . . . although, of course, not in bed with Mark. Never there. Her beautiful Mark, who always wanted *her.* Let the world wonder why . . . she had him, she'd got him. Funny about Mary-Claire, she had a matronly air about her and she was so young. Always in a suit, she must spend nearly her entire salary on clothes, her shoes low-heeled and sensible, her shirts man-tailored. Everything impeccable. And then, her hair—long, dark, thick, and glossy—hanging like a silken curtain down her back. It had never been cut; she bragged about that a lot. You expected her to coil it up tight, the way she thinned out her lips all the time. But there it was and she was very aware of it, tossing her head so that the long fall of hair rippled and shimmered across her tense, tailored back, or running her fingers through it, or tucking it behind her ears. Barbara touched her own neatly tucked-in French knot and thought briefly of going to the ladies' room and taking all the pins out. It was a party, after all, wasn't it?

Mary-Claire was shaking her head in disapproval as

Debbie stared, sad-eyed, across the room. Barbara knew what Debbie was looking at; she'd already checked and she didn't want to turn around again. They were probably still right there: Jeff Lawrence, his muscular body curled around the stick-slim figure of Martha J. He had her backed into a corner, while he leaned an arm on either wall, effectively blocking her movements. Martha J was as cool as always—nothing ever seemed to ruffle her smooth air of utter calm. Today she wore a cream velvet jumpsuit, her skin dark and coppery against it, her profile as remote and expressionless as that of a Watusi warrior in *National Geographic*. Her full lips had a metallic sheen to them. Jeff had his blond head bent close to the bronzed lips; the lines of his lean body looked . . . expectant. But there was a wineglass held in front of her mouth, and Martha J had tucked herself tightly into the corner. In body language, it was quite clear that she was going to resist all his charms. Just as his stance announced that he intended to claim her.

And that's what was making Debbie so miserable, of course. She had such an obvious crush on Jeff, it was almost funny. All that preppie stuff he specialized in—it must all seem very elegant and upper-class to Debbie. The letter sweater and the shirts with their open collars and the shaggy dark hair and the twinkly eyes, the oh-golly charm. And of course he was extremely bright. Natalie had said, "Don't be fooled by Jeff's adorable little-boy act. He's as sharp as a tack, believe me. Almost too shrewd, if you ask me."

I didn't have to be told, Barbara thought. I grew up with all those beautifully behaved little WASP boys who'd stick their hands up your dress in Sunday school if the teacher's back was turned for an instant. So good and innocent with the grownups and so sneaky and sly with their peers. Oh yes, she knew that type. She could see exactly why Martha J offered him such a challenge. There was something . . . smoky about Martha J, something smoldering deep in her dark, enigmatic eyes, something secret. Jeff Lawrence wouldn't like any woman to keep herself a secret from him. He was too used to having it all his way because of

always having been so splendid-looking . . . like Mark. They might not fuss a lot, or constantly look into the mirror—well, they didn't have to, did they?—but they knew their power. And when someone female didn't immediately melt . . .

"Look at that! It's dis*gusting*!" That was Mary-Claire, her narrow, deep-set eyes riveted on Martha J and Jeff. "Just look at the way he hangs *over* her—I mean, really, and at Natalie's party! I mean, they both work for her, don't they? Disgusting!"

"Oh, M.C.," Debbie protested, weakly. "He's not doing anything, he's not even touching her."

"He doesn't have to; any fool could see what's on *his* mind. They're all the same, after one thing! I'd like to see him try that on one of *us*, Debbie!"

"I wish it *was* me, M.C. Well, I *do*, so you can stop looking so prissy at me!"

"Disgusting! Don't you remember that guy from Queens, the one in that disco? How he just snubbed you the next time he saw you?"

"But, M.C., you told him he was a pig . . . and you told him I hate to dance . . . well, you *did*, I heard you. I came back from the ladies' room and I *heard* you. You sent him away!"

"Well! I like *that*! I thought we were best friends, Debbie! And you sneak around like that? Well, I did you a favor. He was stupid, that guy."

"He was cute."

"Stupid. He was only a *printer*, Debbie. Ink under his fingernails, ugh!"

"I liked him, M.C. You shouldn't have done that. You really shouldn't have!"

"Debbie, Debbie, you know I'm only looking out for your best welfare. How long have we been best friends?"

Sigh. "Since first grade."

"There. You see? Who knows you better—me or some printer?"

"I wasn't saying he knew me—"

"There. Of course he didn't. You can do better, Deb. You can do better."

"Yeah, sure. Just look at him . . ."

"Who?"

"Jeff Lawrence. Just look at him. Princeton and prep school and all—and that face! Better than Robert Redford, I swear to you, M.C. He smiled at me this morning, at breakfast, you know, in Natalie's office. Yes, he did. And gave me a little wink. And I was hoping . . . but look, here it is, the party, and I put on my sexiest dress and all he can think about is Martha J."

"Well, it's disgusting and besides, she's colored! You don't want him after he's had his hands on her!"

"Oh, yes I do! I don't care! And besides, M.C., I *like* Martha J. She's neat."

Mary-Claire blanched a bit and clutched at Debbie's arm. "Ohmygawd, would you look what he's doing now—!"

Barbara, completely engrossed in this scene, turned to see what it was—undoubtedly disgusting—that Jeff Lawrence was now doing to Martha J. And found herself, instead, looking straight into the dark eyes of Peter Marcus, who had come into the board room and was bearing down on her this very moment.

Without too much thought, she poured him a glass of wine. Something about the look of him said, Give that man a drink and calm him down. She eyed him as he strode over. Peter gave an impression of being much taller than he really was—perhaps because of the way he had his office arranged, but no, it had more to do with the way he projected himself. You thought of him as towering over you, when in reality, he was about 5′10″ . . . not short, but not gigantic either. He was quite swarthy—did he keep up his tan under a sunlamp, she wondered—which only served to set off the expensively barbered silvery-gray hair, thick, crisp, and deeply waved. His hair was his one real asset, she realized watching him. His face, long and narrow, looked even more so because of the narrow, hooked slice of nose down the middle. He wore glasses, aviator-style glasses, of course, tinted gray, of course. His chin was long, sharp, cleft surprisingly. He was not a handsome man, not really, but he looked expensive and powerful. As

slender as he was, his shoulders in the $500 gray suit looked broad and strong, and one had the feeling that underneath the clothes was a trim, tight body with trim, tight muscles.

He looked exactly like Peter J. Marcus of Marcus and Morrisey, Inc., of Madison Avenue, New York City. He looked like the Boss-Man and, as he bore down on her, she felt a frisson of anticipation. Wordlessly, she held out the glass of wine.

"Good evening, Mr. Marcus." Spoken sweetly, almost girlishly. She could have bitten her tongue off . . . why did she do that, almost automatically? Never mind, he grinned at her with pleasure and gulped down half the glass of wine.

"You are beautiful, Barbara, ah . . . no, no, don't tell me, I'm going to remember because it was a *meaningful* name . . ." He sipped at the rest of the wine, a hand resting lightly on her wrist, his eyes boring into hers. "Ah yes, Barbara Valentine, the sexy cook," he murmured. With thumb and forefinger, he squeezed her wrist gently. "Barbara Valentine, tell me how you're liking it at Candyland. . . ."

"Candyland?" Dare she take her arm away? His finger rubbed her wrist, caressingly. She didn't like it.

"M & M. The coated candies? Surely you know—"

She forced a laugh. "Of course. How silly of me. I'm loving it here at . . . um . . . Candyland, Mr. Marcus."

"Peter." He leaned forward and, quite without warning, gave her the whisper of a kiss on her mouth; but he had withdrawn almost before she could react. Her heart was hammering in her chest. There was something terribly suggestive about everything he did; had she had too much to drink or what? He had quite a presence; she felt totally overwhelmed, even though, to tell the truth, she was taller than he. And probably heavier.

"You're doing wonderfully well, I hear, beautiful Barbara. Millard has nothing but wonderful things to say." He turned to pour himself another glass of wine without relinquishing her wrist. "Ah, you need a refill." Now he let go of her and took her wineglass from nerveless fingers,

quickly and deftly pouring more and handing it back to her. Almost gratefully, she took a deep drink of the chilled wine.

For a moment, she couldn't believe it. For just a moment she thought she was dreaming it. Peter Marcus had his free hand cupped around her left breast, his fingers squeezing and caressing the soft flesh.

Barbara was frozen, unable to take her eyes from his. He was still smiling sweetly, chatting in an amiable way, as he pinched at her nipple. "It's too bad about Nature Boy, isn't it? But I'm over that now. There's a new product coming on the market anyway—some kind of dessert mix. Time we had something sweet to work on, don't you think? . . . something sweet and smooth and soft and succulent—"

Barbara was unable to move or speak to react at all. Her mind went skittering around. She should scream . . . no. She should break away . . . but he'd make a fuss . . . she had to do *something* . . . make him stop. But she never knew what to do when a man got out of hand; and before now, Mark was always with her.

Suddenly, Jake was there, behind Peter, and had reached out to grasp Peter's wrist, lifting the hand away from her breast.

In a murmur only the three of them could hear, Jake said with a laugh: "You've misplaced your hand, Peter, but don't worry, I found it. I do need Barbara; we are having a discussion about hearts and we badly need a valentine . . ." He kept right on talking smoothly, taking her arm and leading her away toward the other side of the room. As they walked away, with his arm laid protectively across her shoulders, he handed her his drink. "Take a sip, dear lady. You look as if you could use it."

Barbara did as she was told, then made a face. It was scotch, straight, and she hated the taste of scotch.

"Look," Jake went on, "he's the boss, but you don't have to take it from him. He does some kind of number on every woman he meets; it's a visceral reaction. And he's such a spoiled brat—only child and all that—he doesn't know when he's misbehaving. But he's really very good-natured about it. Everyone always stops him . . . You have

to let him know you're really not interested . . . oh, some women are . . . he's not a bad-looking guy, and I understand he's a great date—" He laughed, then stopped, turning her to face him. "There. Now we're safe . . . and, see, he's already forgotten all about it."

Barbara turned, and sure enough, Peter was now laughing and talking with Marian Rutledge and Natalie's husband. Jake laughed again. "He's never tried it with Rutledge. She's the exception. She'd break his arm!" He put his hands on her shoulders and grinned at her. "Feel better now? You're okay? I know, Peter can be overwhelming at times. Sometimes I think he's really crazy, not just crazy-cute . . ."

"I'm fine, really," Barbara said. Her voice felt rusty, and she suddenly realized that she hadn't said a single word since Peter Marcus had come up to her. She realized she hadn't done a thing but allow herself to be pushed in one direction or another. First Peter, then Jake, dammit! What was she, a baby? She was a grown woman with two half-grown children. Surely she ought to be able to handle whatever came along. "I could use a drink," she lied.

"At your service." He made a mock bow and instantly headed for the bar.

And there I go again, Barbara thought. Sending Jake off to take care of me. No wonder I couldn't handle Peter Marcus. I've never had to handle any grown man . . . Mark's always been there, since the middle of college. Suddenly, she realized she had never, ever in her life *dated* a grown-up man. The last man she had gone out with before Mark was an older man of 20, for God's sake! She'd never had a man over to her place because she'd never had a place of her own! So unlike the sophisticated life Natalie Simon had lived . . .

Natalie took herself another glass of wine and sidled over to Jake. "At last!" she said, keeping it light. "Where the hell have you been? Lurking in doorways? Hiding in corners?"

He patted her arm absently. "Does she prefer red or white, d'you know?"

"Barbara? Haven't the foggiest. You should have asked her while you were hugging her."

"Huh? When was I hugging her? I'm on a mission of mercy . . . Peter made the big move on her and she's still a bit shaky."

"She's a big girl, Jake; and, in case you hadn't noticed, and I'm sure you have, a damn good-looking woman. It must happen to her all the time, so don't tell me the damsel-in-distress fable!"

He put down bottle and glass and grasped her shoulders. "Natalie! Baby! What's the matter? Old age getting you down?"

Angrily, she jerked away from him. "Not funny, Jake!"

"Whoa, baby. I don't know what's eating you; but, whatever it is, you better get rid of it. This is a party, you know. You're supposed to have fun." He grinned down at her, then shrugged when she refused to give in. "Okay. I'm going to go play with the other kids for a while." He picked up the filled glass. "And when you're smiling once more, I'll come back."

Natalie forced a smile onto her lips, as rage filled her throat with a sour taste. "Fuck off!" she whispered, and turned away from him quickly so he wouldn't see the sudden tears that flooded her eyes. A moment later, she regretted her stupid show of jealousy, but he was already back at Barbara's side and they were smiling at each other, damn them! She would have to get a hold of herself; this was stupid. She couldn't spend the rest of her own birthday party standing alone feeling sorry for herself. Damn that Jake! They had had so many terrific years of being loving friends and friendly lovers . . . Why in hell was he all of a sudden screwing it up? And in the middle of her party? Her head was buzzing; she needed a drink and then—?

She refilled her glass, telling herself to calm down, and as she sipped at the wine, hardly tasting it, looked around the room, carefully casual.

An amused Martha J, big bronze earrings swaying back and forth, was undulating across the room, heading right toward her. And directly behind her, gesticulating and talking as fast as he could, was Jeff. God, but he was beautiful

. . . he had the classic matinee-idol good looks that she had always seen in books about the early days of the movies. The young Tyrone Power, the young F. Scott Fitzgerald . . . that type. Chiseled, clearly delineated . . . almost perfect features, but not feminine by any means. He was too rangy to be pretty and too self-involved to be sexy. But he certainly was nice to look at.

Apparently Martha J did not think so. It was obvious that she was trying to get away from him and just as obvious that he wasn't about to take no for an answer this time. But he was going to have his hands full with Martha J, Natalie thought with a bit of pleasure. Martha was the most ambitious and determined of the kiddies. They all knew Nat's No Incest rule, but Martha J was the one most likely to follow it because it was a rule. She wasn't going to ruin any chance she had of making it big in business. Natalie knew Martha's mother had been widowed, and when she went back to work, Martha, at the age of 13, had become the surrogate mother of her three little sisters. She had told Natalie one night over drinks at the Silver Streak that "being a mama once was more than enough. What I want from my life is a career and a lot of money and plenty of private space." She had been living with what she described as a big handsome dude. "I don't want marriage, but I hate sleeping alone," she said. And laughed and laughed.

She really looked gorgeous; well, she usually did. Natalie could see why Jeff would find it hard to resist her. Forbidden fruit and all that. But, dammit, he knew the rule, too. They came close to where she was standing, and dammit, she could *hear* him, the damn fool didn't even care if she overheard.

". . . and you laugh at my jokes. We *must* be meant for each other . . ."

"Jeff! Come off it, please. Remember, we're siblings."

"Oh, screw Natalie and her little family fantasy! Rules were made to be broken!"

At this point, Martha J turned her elegant profile to look at him in pained amazement. "Jee-zuz!" she drawled. "I sure wish I'd said *that!* It's so original. You must be one

of those fancy Madison Avenue copywriters—" She laughed and started to walk away. He grabbed her arm.

"Listen, Martha J! All these months we've been working together and I say, 'Hi, there, Martha J, how you *doin*', how's it *goin*',' and all that shit." He leaned in closer to her, smiling, his even white teeth glinting. "When what I really want to do is bite you on the neck!" And now he laughed.

Martha J patted his hand. "I hate to tell you this, brother," she said evenly, "but currently I am heavily involved with a big handsome dude—with a big, handsome, *possessive* dude—excuse me, with a big, handsome, possessive, former-football, All-American dude—excuse me again, did I mention that he's combat-ready?"

"Okay, okay, I get it. I get it."

"You're about to get more than you thought, buddy boy," Natalie said, from right behind Martha's shoulder. She had had just enough to drink so that she was able to meet his eyes without the least bit of self-consciousness. He was startled and . . . something else, something she couldn't quite name. Smoothly, she rode over whatever he was about to say. "Into my office, please, Mr. Lawrence. You and I are going to discuss family fantasies."

She smiled grimly as the blood drained from his face. Good. He was just a bit too much of a wiseass anyway. A little discipline would get him back into line.

"You'll forgive us, Martha," Natalie said in her sweetest voice, to which Martha answered with a gesture of her hands that said surrender and then backed off gracefully to let them pass.

At the bar, Natalie paused a moment, holding one hand up. "Minute." She filled her glass to the brim—who knew how long this would take?—and then continued. She didn't bother to look back, but she could feel his presence right behind her. At the door to her office, she swung around suddenly to face him, and the wine sloshed onto her hand.

Oh shit . . . never mind . . . "Look, Jeff, this talk is long overdue. Let's get inside and get it over with."

Silently, he preceded her into the office and slumped into one of the wicker chairs, stretching his long legs out in front of him. He would not meet her eyes. He looked like a sulky truant called into the principal's office.

Natalie perched on the edge of her desk, directly over him. He looked up at her, one eyebrow raised, a smile quirking at the corner of his mouth. "Come on, Natalie—"

She glared at him. Just like all of them, wasn't he? Just like all men: just because he was male and bright and appealing, he figured she was a pushover. In a minute, he would grin boyishly at her and, on cue, she was supposed to melt.

"Look, Jeff, you know the rules. I only have two of them. You remember?"

"Yes, ma'am." A mumble. Resentful? She couldn't tell. She took a sip from the wineglass.

"One. No excuse for not doing your best because I hire only the best. Two. No incest, because incest leads to doing less than one's best. Recall?"

"Yes, ma'am. Don't dip your quill in the company ink."

Natalie made a face. "I've always hated that expression."

"Yes, ma'am. Sorry, ma'am."

"Don't get wiseass, Lawrence. See, Martha J has enough on her plate, being black and female in this shitty world." She took another drink. "The world will do its best to screw her; she doesn't need *you* for that."

He sprang to his feet, color rising in his face. "Jesus Christ, Natalie!"

"You denying that's what's been on your mind?"

"What's on my mind is my business. Your business is what I put down on paper." His lips were tight, and a muscle on his jaw twitched angrily.

"You know what makes me furious, Lawrence?" Natalie hissed between clenched teeth. She took another gulp of the wine. "What makes me furious is, if I were a man you'd never answer me that way. You'd damn well keep your mouth shut."

He strode to the door. "Natalie, I admire and respect you. But I really think we ought to postpone this discussion until you're sober."

Natalie took a deep, ragged breath. Her chest hurt, as if burned. "Why, you superior little bastard—!" She dragged air into her lungs painfully, her heart hammering. How dare he! How *dare* he! Beside herself with fury, she met his eyes, thinking in a disjoined way that she mustn't drop her

eyes first, wondering how she could destroy him, the bastard, without actually killing him, thinking, oh Jake, where are you? . . . And then she hurled the glass at him. It smashed against the door, a bare half inch from his face, shattering. Instinctively, he ducked his head away, swearing loudly.

For a blank moment, all she could do was stare at the wet tracks on the door where the wine still dribbled down. And then she realized, oh my God, I could have really hurt him, and ran to him, grabbing him by the arms.

"Oh Jeff, I'm so sorry, I've been upset this evening, I didn't want this party. I told Jerry I didn't want it and he did it anyway, and oh, I'm really sorry—"

He glared down at her. "Bitch!" he spat. He grabbed her, his fingers digging into her shoulders forcing her against him. She felt his insistent erection immediately and, without thinking, pressed her body into it, lifting her lips.

His mouth came down on hers, wide open, the tongue probing and the teeth hard on her lips. She tasted the salt of blood and struggled against him. But this only aroused him more and he tightened his grip on her, grinding his hips into hers. She was breathless, her lips hurting and his hands were really bruising her.

And then suddenly, he let her go, dropping his hands to his sides. He stood there, leaning against the door, breathing heavily. "Jesus," he muttered. "Jesus. I don't know what—"

Natalie reached up with both hands, one on either side of his head, and pulled his mouth down to hers. She kissed him softly, lingeringly, provocatively, until he groaned. Then she let him go and, swaying a little, her eyes fixed on his, she whispered: "Now what!"

Swiftly, he stripped from the waist down, then tugging at her clothes in a kind of frenzy. He grunted in his throat, pushing at her, walking her backward until she was against the edge of the desk. Easily, he lifted her so that her buttocks rested on the desk and she only thought, oh my God all my work, wait and she gasped out, "Wait!" But he was wild by this time, unthinking, unspeaking, unheeding. He pulled her legs apart, shoving his body between them and then,

with a groan he pushed into her with such force that she gave an involuntary cry. And then she was mindlessly responding to the demanding rhythm of his hips. She could not think. The stiff rod of his erection was pushing into her, sliding out, pushing in. . . . Wave after wave of heat rose in her belly; she could feel warmth suffuse her breasts and swell her nipples. She wanted more, more, more and she thrust her hips into him, desperate for every bit of him, clutching at his firm buttocks with her hands, straining him to her.

He began to breathe faster, and she felt him grow even harder inside her. In a harsh voice, he husked: "Give it to me, give it to me, give it to me—" moving faster and faster in time to the words until he rasped, *"Now!"* and pushed himself deeper into her with a lunge. She was overcome with wave after wave of pulsating spasms even as she felt him climax. With the last throb, he gave a mighty groan from deep in his stomach and slumped over her, covering her neck with small dry kisses that burned her skin. She rubbed his back idly, thinking, Jake you can go fuck yourself! She felt a triumphant glow. Come on to Barbara, would he! after all their years together . . .

Jeff Lawrence pulled away from her, smoothing his black hair back with both hands. Natalie sat up on the desk, grinning at him. He really looked pretty ridiculous, shirt and tie as neat as if he were dining at the Yale Club . . . but stark naked from the waist down and rather bedraggled-looking. He refused to meet her eyes, turning instead and striding self-consciously to where he had dropped his clothes, next to the door.

"I hoped you locked it," Natalie said to his back.

Just then, there was a knock on the door and Jeff jumped, literally. Quickly, he reached out and Natalie heard the lock click into place. Oh lord, it had been open the whole time. She felt a hysterical giggle bubble up in the back of her throat. "Holy shit!" she heard Jeff mutter.

Another tap and then Millard's voice, soft yet clear, saying: "Nat? Nat! C'mere, quick."

Her panty hose, lying in a heap on the carpet, were out of the question; but she was able to pull her skirt on and

zip it up as she padded quickly across the room and put her ear up against the door.

"Nat! Nat!"

"Okay, Millard. What is it?"

"You're being missed, darling. *Both* of you. If you hurry, though . . ."

"Okay. Get back to the party." She turned to Jeff and said, "Okay, honey lamb, finish getting dressed and on your way," she laughed.

"Uh, Natalie, I never—uh—I—that was so—uh—"

"Skip it. Right now, the most important thing is for you to get back into the party *pronto*."

"But, Natalie, I—"

She patted his cheek gently. "We'll have a nice long chat one of these days, real soon. Don't worry."

He opened and closed his mouth several times, speechless, to which she smiled and said, "You're a sweet boy, Jeff, but you talk too much." And laughed again.

Without looking at her again, he buckled his belt and opening the door a crack, slid out into the hallway. The door closed softly behind him.

Natalie hurried back to the desk and began to pull on her panty hose. Where in hell had she dropped her shoes? One was under the desk, but the other—? She smoothed herself out with practiced hands . . . well, it hadn't lasted that long anyway. What had it been—five minutes, ten? It had been totally crazy, screwing him here, in her office, with everybody she knew about 100 feet down the hall . . . totally! She couldn't even recall how it had started. It wasn't the most wonderful lovemaking of her entire life, but he wasn't as careful and cautious as she'd always imagined. And he certainly was well equipped. Given different circumstances, who knew what he might be capable of?

"Natalie!" she scolded herself in the mirror. "What the hell are you thinking? The boy works for you! You can't carry on with the hired help; it's not on!" Laughing at herself, she put on lipstick and gave her hair a last pat. She'd do. Both earrings were on, her skirt wasn't even wrinkled, and she spotted the other shoe, kicked under a chair. She'd be out of here in a minute, and nobody would ever guess.

They were making even more noise at the party than when she and Jeff had left. Well, everyone was getting a bit looped. Tommy Thoms was laughing hysterically over by the piano at something Marian Rutledge had just whispered in his ear. Peter was singing his own words to a rendition of "My Way," and there was Jeff, trapped behind the bar, mixing drinks, with Debbie and a tight-lipped Mary-Claire hanging on his every move. Natalie studied him: good boy. He looked just as usual, his hair a bit more rumpled, perhaps, but calm and self-possessed, even smiling.

Nobody took particular note when she walked in. She poured herself another glass of wine, because she wouldn't look natural without it, avoiding Jeff Lawrence's eyes. Here she was, the guest of honor, returning to the fray. So, where was the brass band? What had Millard been so upset about?

Her eyes roved the room. Barbara was deep in conversation, but Martha J's dark eyes met hers and one black eyebrow shot up. In question? *Had* she noticed? And where was Millard anyway? She turned, almost knocking him over. "Jesus, Millard, do you have to creep around on your fucking little cat feet all the time? Can't you make some normal noise, like a normal person!"

"My darling Nat, be grateful for my padded footsteps . . . for you were within an inch of being discovered, dear lady. I myself tried your doorknob and I could hear . . . uh . . . you and your little friend were . . . uh . . . shall we say . . . in flagrante delicto . . . but certain sounds . . . and Peter, you know, was looking for you. I don't think he left the party . . . but I didn't want to take any chances. . . ."

Natalie kissed her forefinger and held it to his lips. "Millard, my friend, you are a sainted person. I'm very grateful to you."

He leaned a bit closer. "Really, Natalie, I don't understand. You used to be so . . . discreet. I mean, *I* always knew when you were entertaining your little amours after hours; but no one else even guessed. Certainly, Natalie dear, it would never occur to you to leave your own party and . . . well, *you* know . . . right nearby, with anyone likely to come looking for you at any moment. . . ."

Natalie sipped at her wine. "Okay. I agree. It was foolish. Luckily, I think you're the only one who caught on." She moved off, heading for Jake at the piano, but before she got there, Peter Marcus disengaged himself from his song and met her, grabbing her by the elbows and pulling her off to the side.

"Natalie, my dearest girl. If you wish to be made vice-president and creative director of M & M, you will really have to learn to confine your creative efforts to the agency, business, and *not* agency staff . . . comprende, sweetie pie?"

"Are you, Peter? Is this a promise? Are you going to make me VP and creative director?"

"Ambitious little witch, aren't we? We'll see, darling. We'll see just how well you can please me." And abruptly he moved off, absentmindedly patting her rump as he left. Bastard!

A hand dropped on her shoulder and she turned to see her husband's face, melancholy, sagging, sad. Oh Jesus, him too? Did *everybody* in the room know that she had just been balling Jeff Lawrence on her desk?

"Natalie," Jerry said, looking deep into her eyes, his own large eyes tearing as he gazed at her. How like a basset hound he looked, Natalie thought. She longed to tear at him, do something to shake him up, reach into him and get to him. *Good*, if he knew about her and Jeff. Good. Let him. About time. All those fantasy plans they had made all those years ago when she agreed to marry him. It was going to be so wonderful. They were going to have such a marvelous life, filled with laughing children, travel, dinners with theater, friends, good times . . . and he was going to take care of her, her big papa bear, forever and ever. And as soon as they were married, it all changed, it all went sour. The day he slumped down in his chair and said with a smile, "Well, thank God I don't have to be witty and charming all the time anymore"—that day had marked the end of the fantasy. What she was left with was not papa bear at all but a mama's boy who had never grown up. Her own eyes filled as she remembered all her high hopes, the dream of that golden future—all smashed to smithereens by the man whom she thought dreamed with her.

She smiled grimly at him, waiting for the accusation. This time, she'd admit it. This time, devil take the hindmost, she'd admit it and he could either accept it or leave.

"Natalie," Jerry said, "I've never been happier in my life."

15 Exit Jake

There were snow flurries outside the curtained window lit by the street-lamps below. That, and a dull, dark gray sky, were all that you could see, if you were flat on your back in the middle of the king-sized bed in Room 332 of the Alden Hotel.

"And here we are, at last," Natalie said. She turned to wink at Jake, but his gaze was fixed somewhere out the window, so she nudged him with her foot. "Do you realize how long it's been?"

"Hunh? . . . how long? Yeah, sure . . . a long time." He still looked out the window, his head balanced on laced fingers.

"You bastard! It's been exactly four weeks . . . *four weeks!* Since the week before that damned birthday party . . . the Thursday before, to be exact . . . the Thursday before, at five-ten P.M. if you want all the details."

"Mmmm . . ." Jake said. "That long, huh?" She opened her mouth to protest, when he turned and gave her a wink. "I realized, now quit it. I am perfectly well aware of how long it's been. Too damn long!" And he reached out for her. Natalie squirmed closer and settled her head on his smooth chest. She could feel his heart beating, slow and steady. "But waiting never hurt nobody . . . You were extra spectacular today . . . a regular Mt. St. Helens," he added.

"Who's this Helen? I'll kill her!"

They both laughed, and Jake smoothed one hand over her hair, as he always did. But it wasn't the same, Natalie knew. She had been fighting the feeling all the way through —ever since they walked in the door, in fact. Something

was missing, something was changed, and it frightened her.

Still caressing her hair, he leaned away, over his side of the bed, stretching and grunting and coming back with a handful of chocolate nut clusters, which he began to stuff between her lips, one at a time. It was one of their routines and generally, she loved it. But she really didn't want any candy right now; she was choking on it. She dutifully ate it anyway, holding the last one out for him to take from her lips with his teeth.

"And now for the grapes, which you will of course peel for me, one by one, with your toenails . . ." He laughed and shifted away from her, sitting up and folding his legs Indian-fashion. "Get up, Nattie, it's time for the main course . . . I have Jarlsberg and pears, a few figs, and a nice bottle of Blanc de Blancs with an unpretentious sparkle and a whimsical bite . . ."

Natalie felt cold. He was joking and smiling and doing all his usual stuff, but there was an emptiness at the center; she knew it. She watched him lay out his pile of goodies on top of the crumpled sheets and felt like crying.

Why was he so intent upon pretending that nothing was different? It was making her crazy! And yet, she was afraid to know. The past couple of weeks, it had been like this. There was nothing dramatic you could put your finger on. It was just that suddenly Jake was very busy being very busy all day. Yes, he made his appearance in her office morning and evening. But she wouldn't see him at all during the day. She was plenty busy, too, but it seemed to her that he used to poke his head in at least a couple of times during the day . . . surely on his way in and out. It was right on his way.

And then there was that feeling of certainty she had in the pit of her stomach. Nothing definite, but Jake and Barbara seemed not to be around at the same time. Crazy notion, really, and yet she was somehow convinced that they were meeting each other after work. They never left together and she never really saw them together. It was stupid! Barbara Valentine was madly in love with that super-looking, tight-assed husband of hers. But the idea

would not leave her, and one evening last week, she marched through the empty corridors, peeking into the kitchen and then—oh shame!—quietly opening Jake's office door. Of course they weren't anywhere around. And the next afternoon, when everyone had their glass of wine and had drifted away, she had oh so casually said to Debbie, "Did Jake and Barbara go out to the elevator yet?" And Debbie, collecting the glasses and dumping the debris, gave her a startled look. "Gee, I just saw Mr. M leave a few seconds ago . . . but I think Barbara went ages ago . . . I *think* I saw her . . . Or was that last night? You want me to run and see if I can catch Mr. M in reception?" And Natalie, her heart beating nervously, had said, "No, no, I'll catch him in the morning."

That was the night she had skulked around the Silver Streak, peering in the window and ducking before Tony could spot her. It was as empty as ever: no curly carrot top, no blond chignon gleaming in the candlelight. At last, she had gone in, feeling empty, isolated, abandoned, and had drunk far too many martinis. Four more times she had haunted the Silver Streak drinking too much. The next place tc look, of course, was the Alden; and the Alden didn't bear thinking about.

And even now, in bed with him, she was afraid to ask, afraid to bring it up. Where were you all those nights? You weren't at the Silver Streak. After eight years of always going to the Silver Streak, where are you going now, Jake? Why aren't you taking me? And who are you with? Who are you with when you disappear?

"So? Come on, Nattie baby. It's all your favorite stuff. I even got you some of that smoked salmon you love so much. It ain't Zabar's, but it's okay . . ." He spoke through a mouthful of food, obviously relishing everything. And here she sat, with a knot in her belly. The very thought of food made her feel nauseated. "Just give me some wine. I'm not very hungry."

"Okeydokey." He poured with his usual lavish hand. She had always loved these little picnics, the little touches he was so good at. Like not just plain plastic tumblers, but plastic champagne glasses. Like the unusual chocolates he

picked up in some little shop in Jersey City. Like the rose he always took from Gloria's desk in reception . . . He'd taken it today, and there it sat, on the dresser, in the water tumbler from the bathroom, wilting. The first time Jake had stolen it, he'd declaimed, "It's none too fresh, but then, neither are we, m'dear! Just two old folks in the sunset of our lives, depending on each other for love and comfort—" And she had punched him in the arm, hissing at him to hush up before somebody heard. Oh how lovely it had been, how simple and how nice! Sitting in the welter of still damp sheets today, looking out in the grimy darkness, those days when she felt secure and sure of him seemed not only impossibly satisfying but impossible, period. Had they ever come running into the hotel room, eager and breathless, tearing at each other's clothes? Yes, of course they had. Even today, as they came in, Jake had laughed, "Last one in is a scaredy-cat!" pulling her with him onto the bed and peeling her clothes off with exaggerated care, caressing and kissing each part of her as he uncovered her. It had been extremely erotic and by the time she was totally nude, she was also totally aquiver with anticipation. So why had she felt nothing, nothing at all, when he finally slipped into her and began the familiar moves? And why now was depression sitting like a shroud, weighting down her shoulders? Oh hell, she knew the answer. It was over. That was it. It was over, and when in hell was Jake going to tell her? Waiting for the axe to fall was a lesson in slow death by anxiety. For days now, for weeks, really, the certainty had been growing. Without ever having seen them together, she knew that Jake's joke-fantasy of being in love with Barbara Valentine was becoming a reality. He was going to leave her, he was going to leave her, not for his lawfully wedded wife, not for Maureen, oh no, but for somebody else, somebody new.

And for Barbara, of all the people! A woman she really liked, who had her head screwed on straight, who was organized and efficient and intelligent . . . my God, Millard was practically purring these days! They had good talks together, she and Barbara, and she was a good addition to the kiddies, she was supportive and friendly and open and

very sweet. But she wasn't supposed to be for *Jake*! He couldn't! It was too much, it was really too much!

"Jake!" She swallowed down her wine and held the glass out for a refill.

He licked his fingers and shot her a questioning look, chewing. He refilled her glass and poured himself one and drank, smacking his lips and sighing with pleasure.

"Jake!" she insisted.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm here."

"I don't like surprise endings," she said.

"What are you talking about?" But he wouldn't meet her eyes.

"Do me a favor, Jake. Don't play dumb, not after all this time."

"Oh God, *games*. You *know* I hate girl games."

"This isn't a game. You know what I'm talking about."

"Goddam it, Nat, I don't! Now either spit it out or swallow it . . ." He laughed shortly, but there was little mirth in it and she noted how quickly he finished his drink and poured himself another. Clammy sweat broke out on her neck. It was true then.

"We're finished, aren't we?" she blurted.

"Finished! Nattie baby, what're you talking about?" He leaned over and gave her a loud kiss on the cheek. "What, *finished*? Aren't we best friends forever?"

"As lovers," she said.

"Aw, Nat."

"We're done as lovers, aren't we?"

He took a deep breath, not looking at her. "You could've fooled me, honey. Unless what we was doin' before was a fignewton of my imagination . . . !" He laughed and kissed her again.

"I'm talking about Barbara Valentine."

"Barbara Valentine!" He laughed again. "What do you mean?"

"Oh Jake, don't do this to me. It's demeaning. You're after Barbara. I've known you long enough to know what's going on. I must say," she added bitterly after a moment's pause, "you show unusual good taste . . . she's beautiful. But very poor judgment . . . she adores her husband."

"For Christ's sake, Nattie, I took the woman for a drink a couple of times."

"Aha! So you *did*!"

"Yes, goddammit, and what's with the *ahas*? I'm free to take a lady out for a drink . . . a dozen ladies for a dozen drinks, if that's what turns me on." His voice had taken on just the slightest edge.

"It's just that . . . It's just that I knew. I've known all the time you've been sneaking around."

"I don't sneak, Nat." He flung himself out of the bed and went to the dresser for a cigarette, lighting it with enormous concentration, while she stared at his lean, almost skinny back, with the knobby spine down the middle and the big freckles across the shoulders. He wasn't much of a muscle man, but he had a cute tush, her Jake, a cute little tush and a nice big cock . . . and, as she'd told him more than once, "If it were the other way around, we'd have been finished long ago." He kept his head lowered as he puffed on the cigarette; even in the mirror, she couldn't get his eye. "And anyway," he said, "it seems to me that *you've* gone after . . . ah . . . outside entertainment from time to time. What about Barry the art director or John, the male model? Not to mention—"

"You don't have to mention anyone else. Naming names isn't very nice. And besides, I never turned off to you!"

"Oh for Christ's sake, Nat! Turned off? I'm not turned off! What do you call what we just did for about forty minutes there on the Sealy Posturepedic? Chopped liver?"

Natalie held out her glass to him. "Give me a refill, will you?"

"What do you need another drink for? To talk to me, for Christ's sake?"

"This is very difficult for me, Jake. Now will you fill me up or what?" They glared at each other in the dresser mirror. Then he turned and snatched the glass from her. "Okay, I'll give you more . . . why not? . . . but you should realize how much you've been drinking lately, Nattie."

"No more than usual."

"Not true! Much more than usual! You're becoming a lush, a lady lush."

"Oh that's right," Natalie said acidly, gulping at the wine. "When all else fails, let's dig up all the old clichés. Nothing worse than a woman who likes to drink, right? My God, Jake, next thing you'll be calling me a nympho because I like to get laid."

"And maybe that, too," he said. "Oh shit, Nat, I'm sorry . . . You know I don't mean that. But your drinking *is* getting out of hand. Friend to friend—"

"Friend!" Somehow the word enraged her. "Friend! I'd call this"—gesturing at the touseled bedding, the pillows on the floor, the dregs of food—"more than friendly, wouldn't you?"

"You're breaking my balls, Nat. Which you've been doing with regularity lately. I'm telling you, you're drinking too much. And I *am* your friend, the best friend you've got."

"Friends! I hate that fucking word! What does it *mean*?" To her horror, she was near tears. Never! Not in front of Jake. "Never mind," she went on. "I know what it means. It means that the very first day you set eyes on Barbara Valentine's ass, you come running to me to tell me all about it, all about how she's the woman of your dreams . . ."

"But, Nattie, I've always told you everything . . . and it was my old shiksa-of-my-dreams joke—!"

"The hell it was! Shit, Jake, don't you understand anything? You told me all about it. And while you were talking, you forgot completely that I was a woman . . . not to mention that I was the woman you've been screwing regularly for the past eight years! Well, since you're so keen on telling me *everything*, tell me, Jake, have you scored? Is she any good?"

"Oh Christ! I'm getting dressed." He stubbed out the cigarette viciously, grinding it into the ashtray.

"Is that what you'd like to do to me? Smash me? Get me to shut up?"

"Nat, for Christ's sake!"

"Look, Jake . . ." She watched him pull on his pants, feeling something like panic. They never got dressed this early! Never! It was always sex, food, and then more sex. "Jake, will you quit that?"

"What now?"

"Stop getting dressed for a minute."

"Holy jumping shit, Nat, what in hell has gotten into you? You are crazy! You're trying to make me say something or do something nuts. I don't like it, and I won't join in your stupid game." He scowled, threw his tie around his neck and got into his tweed jacket. Then he dug for a cigarette and lit it, inhaling noisily. Blowing out a cloud of smoke, he smiled tentatively and said, in a softer voice: "Hey! Nat!"

She would not smile. "What?" It sounded sulky; she knew it sounded sulky and she hated it. Hated *him.*

"Listen, baby, let's blow this joint . . ." He looked at her, one eyebrow cocked in question.

Natalie knew precisely what she was expected to do. It was one of their old familiar numbers. He—or she—said when they got bored, "Hey baby, let's blow this joint," and then she—or he—answered, "Which door, and how fast?" It might have been an old Mae West-W.C. Fields routine, she could never remember exactly.

If she gave the required response, the tension would dissolve. All she had to do was open her mouth and say five one-syllable words, and they would have bypassed the trouble. For today anyway.

She grabbed two handfuls of sheet and squeezed hard. Her heart was pounding wildly, as if she had run a mile. "It won't do, Jake," she said stubbornly.

"Christ!" He rolled his eyes heavenward.

"Oh sure, when all else fails, just say Oh Christ! Come on, you can do it. You want out . . . so why not say so? Come on, just say it, it'll hardly hurt!"

"You're out of your mind!"

"No, I'm not! I'm not out of my mind and don't you say it! I know what's happening and you won't admit it!"

"If you're so fucking smart and already know everything, why do you need me to admit it? You're really hysterical, Nat. Come on, let's beat it." He shoved his tie into his jacket pocket and began to look around for his cigarettes. "We'll have a nice, soothing drink at the Silver Streak, and you'll feel lots better in no time."

Natalie felt paralyzed, her limbs leaden. The thought of getting out of the bed, clothing herself, putting on a face, going out and acting as if things were normal . . . it was more than she could contemplate. "Typical male reaction," she said acidly. "I try to talk the truth and you tell me I'm hysterical. I want to get it all out in the open and you only want to get to a public place where we can't talk about anything important. If you care anything at all about this relationship—"

"Care anything at all! What has brought this *on*?"

"We're in terrible trouble, Jake."

"Terrible trouble! Over a couple lousy drinks with a married woman who happens to have a gorgeous tush . . . don't hit! don't hit!" He laughed again.

"We're in terrible trouble, Jake," she repeated.

"What trouble? I'm perfectly happy—or I *was*, until you started in."

Natalie shook her head. "I don't believe it. I don't believe it. You're withdrawing from me. Even while we were screwing, I could tell you were a million miles away . . . And it ends up, it's my fault, right? I'm hysterical and I'm starting in, and now all I need is for you to ask me if I'm expecting my period."

He snapped his fingers, grinning broadly, but there was no amusement in his pale eyes. "*That's* what it is! You expecting your period, Nattie? Your hormones run amok, have they?"

She felt suddenly very, very tired. He was right: she already knew it was over. So what was she battling so hard for? Just to hear him say it—that they were finished? She knew they were finished. All that was needed now was a decent funeral.

She sighed heavily. "Oh Jake. You're always so busy being funny. You know that's your way of denying that anything matters enough to be dealt with on any kind of adult level."

"Oh shit!" Jake said. "*More* of Psych 110 A? Will you kindly come *off* it, Nat?"

"No, I won't. I won't because you always—" By the time she had said the second "won't" he was out the door and had slammed it behind him.

Natalie sat very still on the bed. The smell of cheese and pâté was nauseating. She turned to look at the dregs and crumbs of what Jake had always called their Love Feast and began to cry, gulping and sobbing like a child. "Fuck you, Jake!" she shouted and with one hand, swept everything onto the floor. With the tears coursing down her cheeks, she rolled out of the bed and walked to the dresser, staring into the mirror at her distorted face. The wine bottle was still there, sweating onto the glass top. She poured herself a hefty drink and gulped it down. Then she wiped away the tears from her ravaged face and ran her finger through her hair, still staring at her reflection. Stupid, how stupid! Here she was, a grown woman, a mother, considered intelligent—and adult—right? And she was heartbroken and weeping alone in a shabby hotel room, crying like a teenager over her first lost love, and for what? For an earth-shaking love affair? Not at all. For the once-a-week fuck of two people who were married—to two other people! It was funny, really, it was hilarious.

Here she was, at the age of . . . well admit it, say it, shout it to the world, at the age of 41, on the verge of becoming a vice-president and maybe creative director of one of Mad Avenue's better ad agencies, and all she had in her life to cry over was somebody else's husband! It was too goddam much!

"You have a rotten husband of your own!" she shouted to her reflection. "Cry over *him*, why don't you?" But that well was long since dry. Those tears had been shed, over and over again many years before. Too late to cry for Jerry Weber, for the marriage she had destroyed for him, for the marriage he had destroyed for *her*. . . .

"Ah, shit!" she said to herself and abruptly stopped crying. There were no more tears; God, it felt as if there would never be any tears ever again. She gazed at her image in the glass; it seemed to her there were cracks forming in her face already. "Ah, shit." Repair the ravages. God bless Estee Lauder. She took a deep breath and, holding it, posed herself, checking in the mirror. Good body, nothing wrong with it, terrific in fact. Okay. Without all the makeup and with her eyes red-rimmed, it didn't quite come off, but what the hell.

She dressed quickly and fixed her face. She gave herself a great big flashy smile. "Let's blow this joint," she told her reflection; and watched her reflection give the response: "Which door, and how fast?"

16 Lunch Hour

*Sunlight gilded the snow-dappled gar-*goyles carved under the roof of the building across the street—which was all that you could see, if you were flat on your back in the middle of the king-sized bed in Room 1247 of the Alden Hotel.

"Very impressive," Natalie murmured into Jeff Lawrence's shoulder. "Innovative, creative, and a terrific hard-sell." She chuckled deep in her throat, gave his ear a little nibble, and snuggled in a little closer. His chest was broad and furry, very different from Jake's smooth, slender frame.

"That wasn't copy I just handed you, Natalie!"

"Don't worry, *bubbele*, I wasn't about to make any corrections or changes. You were well-nigh perfect—which is more than I can say for your new campaign for Disco Din-Dins—which I found on my desk this morning." With enormous pleasure, she ran both hands down his muscular back, patting his tight round buttocks. "Yum, yum," she murmured and bit his ear again.

Jeff reared up, pulling away from her a bit. "Business? You're actually going to talk *business*! I thought we had better things on our minds . . . I know *I* do." Expertly, he began to rub her body. But Natalie shook her head, smiling. "Not now, sugar . . . your lunch hour is over."

"Aw, Natalie . . ."

"No arguments, please. We must be *très, très* discreet. Just pick up your gorgeous body and put some clothing upon it and get back to the office . . . unless, of course . . ." She stretched herself voluptuously. "Unless, of course, you want everyone to catch on. Then we'd have to stop."

"Are you kidding? This is the greatest—I mean . . . I

still can't believe a fantastic woman like you wants to have a thing to do with me—!"

Natalie put a gentle finger on his lips. "I heard you use that line on Martha J last week. Watch it."

"Did I? I don't think so." He smoothed his hair back and gave her a sheepish grin, running one hand down her body along the curve from neck to ankle. "Talk about yum!" he said.

Natalie gave him a spank. "You are a naughty little boy, you know that? Now get along . . . I want you all alert and prepared for the copy meeting at three."

He kept caressing her with slow, sure strokes. "I *am* prepared, ma'am," he said. "Can't I stay here just a while longer? I'll work *very* hard."

"No, not a good idea."

"Anything is a good idea that furthers our relationship."

"Relationship!" she snapped. "We don't have a relationship, sugar, we *screw*!"

In answer, he bent over her and, starting at her throat, began to kiss the entire length of her body. It felt good, his warm, avid mouth. Natalie moaned, closed her eyes, and allowed herself to relax into it. Fuck you, Jake. You don't have to love me, you can go chase somebody else. Go chase yourself, in fact. I don't need *anybody*, I can take care of myself!

Conran's at noon was the beehive cliché come to life. The escalators were jammed with shoppers and the aisles, lined with housewares in bright primary colors, seemed to shimmer in the bright light. The merchandise was all out in the open, stacked and arranged in a thousand different and unusual ways—in triangles of red mesh baskets that reached the ceiling, in gridworks of mugs, in glittering emerald-and-sapphire towers that on closer inspection turned out to be plastic wastebaskets.

"I love this place," Barbara exclaimed. "It all looks so delicious and wonderful. It makes you want everything. And then," she added with a laugh, "you realize you don't need any of it."

Jake reached over and casually took her hand. "But isn't it fun, being seduced?" he said.

Barbara darted a quick sidelong glance at him. Did he mean what she thought he meant? He was grinning like an imp. With the red hair and the twinkle in his eyes, he always reminded her of a sophisticated Huck Finn. There was something very endearing about Jake. She'd only been alone with him on a couple of occasions, but each time she'd felt totally comfortable. It surprised her because she wasn't used to dealing with men as herself. Jake had never even met Mark, so he didn't see her as Mark's wife. And he certainly didn't see her as Jen and Scott's mommy. It was refreshing, in a way. It had been a good many years since she'd thought of herself as a separate person.

It was a problem, though, trying to figure out when Jake was kidding and when he wasn't. It bothered her, because normally she was very good at knowing how people felt. She settled for an evasive "Depends."

"I know what you mean," Jake said, and squeezed her hand. Barbara stared at a stack of practical white china pitchers—everything in Conran's was simple and practical—and thought about pulling her hand away. And then she thought, My Lord, how silly. If I don't want the man to hold my hand, all I have to do is pull away. Right now. Nothing to it. But it felt warm and nice. Mark didn't like to hold hands. He was so passionate in bed. But he didn't care for any of the usual outward signs of affection. He always called her "Barbara," never "honey" or "sweetheart"—or he called her "Barbie doll," which lately she had come to detest.

Jake pulled her along. "Hey, look at those!" Hanging from the ceiling were dozens of multicolored dragonflies: paper kites, moving slightly in the air conditioning. "Wouldn't they be great, hung from the ceiling or hallway! Or on a kitchen wall." He squeezed her hand again. "What do you think?"

Barbara stared at the kites, enthralled. They were so bright, so colorful, so unserious. In a kitchen, indeed! She'd love to hang two or three above the work counter . . . wouldn't that be fun! She said so to Jake and he said, "Good, let's get three or four."

"Oh no!"

"Why not? I need a couple for my place . . ."

"Oh, I wouldn't dare, Jake. Mark would have a *fit*. The house is his . . . project, his ad for himself, in a way. *Nothing* comes in without his say-so . . . oh dear . . ." She laughed. "You know, Jake, I never realized it before, not really. But I've never chosen one single item myself—not even the sheets. I mean, sheets *are* usually considered a woman's province, aren't they?" She stopped and frowned at the display of kites without really seeing them. When she turned to Jake, he was looking at her so intently that she felt embarrassed, somehow, as if he could see inside her head. For a moment, she had a flash of feeling disloyal to Mark, but that was crazy.

"Of course," she went on, "the house is absolutely gorgeous, I mean, it all *flows*—as Mark and his partner like to say." She laughed again, briefly. "If you want to know the truth, Jake, I never really knew what the hell that meant."

"But I'll bet you know how to decorate," Jake said.

"I don't know. I think my taste is pretty good. But . . . I don't know. My feeling is that if you buy what you love, it'll just naturally go together."

"Hey, great! That's always been my secret philosophy of life." He leaned a bit closer and murmured into her ear: "Go after what you like and you'll just naturally go together." He paused. "That doesn't make sense. Except that it does. Seriously . . ." He paused again.

"Seriously? From you, Jake?"

"Seriously. You've really never picked out anything that you liked just because you liked it?"

"I've really never."

"You're deprived, did you know that?"

"No. I'm not. Really. I've never minded. I love everything in our house. Mark has marvelous taste!"

"He picked you, didn't he?"

Barbara laughed gaily, not knowing quite how to respond. "It's a case of the famous I ran after him until he caught me."

"Well, that's something you picked out," he said, and she immediately felt better; she didn't know exactly why. "How would you like a second chance?" Jake said. For some reason, this simple sentence made her heart beat faster.

With a suddenly dry mouth, she said, "What do you mean?" She thought she saw something flicker in his eyes momentarily, but then it was gone.

Jake led her to where kitchen aprons were hung over bushel baskets of white enamel saucepans. "Barbara, nobody else knows this yet . . ."

"Yes?"

"Well, the fact of the matter is . . . I've left my wife."

"Jake!"

"Well, I have. There it is. I've moved out of East Brunswick, New Jersey—the epicenter of the universe, as no doubt you already know—to West 84th Street, to be closer to Zabar's. No, no, don't say anything, it's not a tragedy. I've *always* been in love with Zabar's. But I did leave her custody of everything: the house, the car, the garden, the two cats, the dog, and the goldfish; and I am forced to bed down on the floor in a sleeping bag. *That*, Barbara, for a man of my years, is tragic."

"Oh, Jake, I'm so sorry. I kind of want everybody to stay married and be happy."

"In my case, dear lady, two mutually exclusive states of being."

"Oh dear, I wish—" She broke off. She could see by the closed look on his face that she'd better shut up.

"I want you to pick out the stuff for my bachelor pad . . . leer, leer . . . and then I'll invite you up to see it."

"I—well, I don't know . . . I—well, actually . . ." To her surprise, she found herself giggling. "That sounds like fun. I've always wanted—oh dear, it's not *my* place, it's yours. You're supposed to tell me what *you've* always wanted."

"What I've always wanted, my dear Barbara," Jake said, reaching out for her other hand, "is to have a beautiful blonde furnish my brand-new apartment. Say yes, Barbara, say yes."

Now she began to really look around at the array of things on display. Almost literally, her mouth began to water. Her eyes darted, coming back again and again to bright yellow and white checks, to the clean simplicity of white and black. Yes, the white dishes, the yellow mats, baskets all over the wall, the white plastic grids against buttercup paint and black for accent . . . Excited as a

child, she began to lead him from section to section. "Do you like this, Jake?" "How's that?" And to everything, he said, "*You* pick; this is your party."

Right in the middle, she stopped. "Oh dear!"

"What now? I thought I was making you truly happy," Jake said lightly.

"Oh no, I love this. It's just that . . . oh dear, I'm planning a dinner on December eleventh. I'm inviting Natalie and her husband, and I had planned to ask you to bring your wife. But now . . ."

There was a strange and awkward silence, while he shifted his gaze off into the middle distance. Finally, he said, "Um . . . Natalie. Well, you see, the fact is, Natalie and I had a major disagreement yesterday after work . . . something personal, is all. Appearing at your dinner table, my beloved and beautiful Barbara, would not be the best thing at this time . . ."

"Oh. So that's why you didn't come by her office this morning for breakfast."

"Yep. We need some time to cool down . . . as it were."

Barbara knew that he and Natalie went back a long way. What could she say? How was she supposed to treat this news? She was sorry he had told her.

"Another time then?" she said in her best, brightest social voice. "Or, if you change your mind . . . if you think maybe it would help patch things up if you came . . . and anyway, I'd like you to meet Mark. He'd have *great* ideas for your place!"

He gave her a strange little smile. "No, Barbara dear, I want *you* to have the great ideas all by yourself. I'm handing you my little home pristine and virginal, for you to do with as you will." He waggled his eyebrows and gave her the Groucho leer. "Say the secret woid and I'll paint the walls pale puce. Come on now," he said, "let's blow this joint." After a moment, he gave a tight little laugh.

"What is it?" Barbara said.

"Nothing, nothing. Forget it. An old joke, not worth repeating."

When they emerged onto Third Avenue, where a chilly wind was blustering, he dropped her hand to put his gloves

on, and she felt suddenly disconnected and cold. Quickly, she put on her fuzzy mittens and began to walk, not looking at him. He'd been holding her hand for nearly an hour! It had felt so natural, she hadn't even realized it till he let go. How peculiar.

After a minute or two, Barbara felt the silence between them become awkward. She slid her eyes over at him, striding along beside her, hands jammed deep into his pockets, coat collar turned up against the raw wind. Unreadable. Jake had that frank, open face, but the truth was, he hid everything behind it.

She was beginning to wonder what in the world to say to him to cheer him up when he turned to her with his familiar good-natured grin. "Know what, Barbara?" he said, "it has occurred to me that we are going to have to spend a lot of lunch hours together."

"Why?"

"Why, for shopping, of course. After Conran's, there's Fabrications. And then, and then, who knows, maybe even Bloomingdale's. Stick with me, kid, and I'll take you to all the best places!"

Back to normal, that was a relief. She wouldn't tell Mark, of course . . . not just yet . . . he might not understand. "Honestly," she said to Jake, "do you really think it'll take so long?"

"Oh yes," he said, taking her hand and tucking it under his arm. "I figure it's going to take a long, long time to get everything I want."

17 Dinner at the Valentines'

The cabbie didn't know Brooklyn Heights, so he let Natalie and Jerry off at the one place he'd heard of: the St. George Hotel. From there, they had to ask directions and walk, and it was dark. The radio had predicted two to seven inches of snow, but already there was a foot on the ground and thick wet flakes falling, swirling in heavy, blinding waves, clinging to hair and coats and even eyelashes.

"Look at this!" Jerry cried, flinging his arms out to embrace the line of lamp-lit, snow-laden trees and iron fences that stretched away toward the river from the corner of Hicks and Pineapple. "If it weren't for the parked cars, you couldn't tell what century this is around here . . . it's like a Currier and Ives print come to life! *Look* at this place, Nat! I didn't know neighborhoods like this still existed!"

"You mean a neighborhood no self-respecting hackie knows anything about?"

"Nat, Nat, Nat," Jerry coaxed, taking her arm. "It's gorgeous! I mean, just look at it. It's like . . . London!"

"Oh really, Jerry? When were you in London?" She shook away from the confines of his grasp. "Don't do that, Jer. It's too slippery underfoot and you're pulling me off balance."

He withdrew from her as if burned. "Oh. Sorry. Well,

sure I don't really know London. I meant . . . from pictures. And anyway . . ."

"Skip it, it doesn't matter. What matters is that these damn boots are leaking! Eighty-five bucks and they don't even keep your fucking feet dry!"

They bent their heads against the wind and plodded on through the heavy drifts. "It's the next block, I think," Jerry said after a moment. "And . . . um . . . I hope your mood improves drastically within that next block."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nattie, please don't be belligerent," he said. "You've been awfully belligerent for the last week or so."

"What the fuck do you mean—*belligerent*?" Natalie began and then she had to laugh, she sounded so . . . well, so belligerent. "Oh shit, Jerry, you know how I hate weather. And I couldn't run this morning because of this." In expiation, she took his arm. "And dear Peter has been on my case lately, as you well know. But I'll let a smile be my umbrella and whistle a happy tune, and then no one will know that I'm afraid. Or something."

"It'll be a nice evening," Jerry said. His voice was placating, tinged with hope, almost a question.

Natalie sighed inwardly. She had had to push and insist to get him out this evening. He was all for begging off when he saw how deep the snow was. He had refused to drive in it and then whined at the cost of the taxi. And now, after all that labor on her part, after all that explaining and justification, he ended up telling *her* to shape up and enjoy the evening! It was a major effort, always, to get Jerry Weber to move his fat arse and go anywhere. Nobody knew how hard she always had to work. And then he always acted as if the whole thing had been his idea. Watch, he'd be taking credit for making friends with the Valentines.

Tonight when he'd started to fuss, she'd just gone to get dressed, talking to him all the while. Finally, when she had said she'd go with *or* without him, he'd heaved himself out of his chair and gone to change, muttering and moaning that they'd probably never get a cab in this weather, and certainly not coming back. As for her, she had done what

she always did at these moments. She stuck her tongue out at his retreating back, gave him the finger, and went straight to the kitchen to pour herself a drink from the bottle of vodka she always kept chilled in the fridge.

And now that they were there—trudging through the slush and the snow in the dark in a strange neighborhood, he had the fucking nerve to come over all poetic and enthusiastic! She glanced up at him, bulky and stolid next to her. He had put on some more weight, she noted. The flesh just under his jaw was fast becoming a true double chin. For the umpteenth time, she asked herself, "What am I doing with this man?" For the umpteenth time, she had no ready answer.

"Of course it'll be nice," Natalie said. "Barbara's a fantastic cook, so the meal will be splendid, I'm sure. And here we are. 800 Orange. A cute house, if you like houses." They climbed the stairs. "Did I tell you she has a cute husband? . . . if you like husbands."

"I don't think I like that statement," Jerry began, but then the door was opened by a tall, lanky boy dressed in jeans and a cut-off sweat shirt silhouetted against the hall light. "Hi, I'm Scott," he said. "You're Natalie . . . and Mr. Weber." Natalie couldn't see his face until they had stepped inside: it was exactly the same as Mark Valentine's, but *exactly!* The image!

The kid looked at her and grinned. "I know, I know, I look just like the old man."

"That's right." You couldn't help but smile back; he was a regular pixie, he was so cute. She wondered whether his father ever let loose enough to give a warm, ready smile like that.

"Do you mind?" Natalie asked.

"Looking like him? You kidding? Everyone says he's great-looking, why should I mind?"

"Actually, I meant do you mind people always remarking on it."

"Nah, I'm used to it."

"Is that them?" Barbara's voice floated down the hall. A second later, she herself came floating out of the doorway, dressed in a cream silk shirt and dark gray velvet pants, her fair hair loose and shimmering. "Or should I say, is it *they?*

No, that sounds worse. Oh never mind, welcome, welcome! I was so afraid . . . every time the phone rang, I said to Mark, 'Oh Lord, I hope it's not Nat and Jerry begging off on account of the storm!' The Babcocks had to cancel, I'm sorry to say. Well, if you're going to live in Farmingdale—!"

"We're intrepid," Natalie laughed. But she thought, I wonder just how eager Mark was that it not be us begging off.

"But it's been clients, clients, clients," Barbara went on, coming to greet them, pressing her flushed cheek first against Natalie's, then Jerry's. She smelled divine. "In fact, that's where he is now, upstairs on the telephone, talking biz." She made a face. "Let's us have a drink by the fire."

In five minutes, the three of them were all sitting on big puffy pillows on the floor in front of the fireplace, frosty glasses in hand, while Scott passed a large wooden tray laden with hot savories: curried shrimps and Swedish meatballs and miniature meat rolls and tiny chunks of chicken dipped in something marvelous.

"Thank you, ah . . ." Natalie stopped. "I'm sorry, I don't know your name . . . Barbara! Why didn't you ever tell me!"

"Scott," said Jerry, quietly.

"Of course, of course . . . Scott . . ."

"That's okay," the boy said. "There are only seven Scotts in my class."

"And fifteen Jennifers in Jen's." Barbara laughed and licked her fingers. "Oh good, the chicken came out just right . . . did you try the chicken, Jerry? I've always been turned onto whatever is popular," she said to Natalie. "When I named Jen, I thought I was so original. And then, the first time I called her in the playground, a whole herd of little girls came running."

"I've got a cartoon in my room," Scott said, "It shows a grade-school class picture, with the names. And they're all Scott or Jennifer . . ." He began to giggle. "I dig it, it's so true to life . . . Jennifer, of course, thinks it's *gross* to have such a *common* name. She says she's going to pick herself a new one."

"Oh, honey, that's just talk. Just one of Jenny's little notions. Pass that tray this way, would you? Let me try the meatballs. And then will you be a darling and run into the kitchen, Scott, and bring out the wine? Nat needs a refill." He went and she called after him, "And remember to put it into the bucket with ice around it, okay?"

"Yes, Ma, I get it, Ma, I know how to keep a bottle of wine chilled, Ma."

Why was he serving and being a kitchen helper alone? Natalie wondered. Where was his sister? Maybe she was out on a date, wasn't she seventeen or something? The boy came back in just a minute, beaming with pleasure at himself, the liter bottle of wine held in a lovely oak bucket. He came right over to her, and she lifted her glass to be filled. He was a darling boy, unaffected and easy. If I were a dirty old woman . . . and she let the thought drift without finishing it. Shame, Natalie, she scolded herself. You're old enough to be the kid's mother, for Christ's sake. Behave yourself. Nevertheless, she found herself following his cute little rear end with her eyes as he bent to put the wine down near his mother and then walked back to the kitchen. She took a healthy swig of the wine. It was very good, quite unusual.

She leaned back against the suede couch—it was superior leather the color of honey, as soft as baby skin—and looked around the room. Admit it, as rooms went, this one was drop-dead. High ceilings with beautiful carved moldings, a gorgeous arched fireplace, two arched windows looking out on Orange Street. There were three of the butterscotch-color suede couches pulled up around a magnificent Oriental rug, old and somewhat faded, in tones of ivory, rose, and brick. The walls were a dusky rose. Lamps were low and shaded and gave a warm, subtle glow. From somewhere came muted chamber music; a fire crackled gently in the grate; and from the kitchen nearby wafted the rich aroma of duckling, and something she couldn't name but found mouth-watering. One wall was completely filled with a large oil painting of a couple sitting under trees, dappled with sunlight, serene, peaceful, quiet, relaxed. The way she was beginning to feel. It was a soporific room, she

decided, sipping more slowly at the aromatic wine. Very soothing.

Barbara, holding out the tray of tidbits, smiled sweetly at Jerry, the picture of the perfect hostess. "Tell me," she was saying, "was M & M as crazy and wonderful when you were there?"

"That all depends," Jerry said in his slow, rumbling way, "on what you consider wonderful. And, of course, on what you consider crazy."

"Well, wonderful is working with Millard and Natalie." Here she shot a grin at Nat, who raised her glass in salute.

"If that's wonderful," Natalie said, "then I want to hear what's crazy. Because I always thought that working with Millard and me was fairly insane."

Barbara sipped at her wine and gave herself some more from the bottle. "Help yourself," she said. "I'm not going to make a pest of myself running around from person to person." Natalie immediately got up and refilled her glass. This is really first-class stuff, she thought. "Yes, everyone at M & M has that lunatic quality . . . that's what makes it fun," said Barbara. "But . . ." She paused for quite a few seconds, finally adding in a muted tone: "Peter Marcus."

Natalie threw her head back and laughed, spilling a bit of wine on her hand. "Oh God yes, Peter Marcus, indeed. That's quite a 'but,' I must admit. When it comes to sheer lunacy, he's right out of *my* league . . ."

Jerry waved his hand to silence her. "Wait, Nat. Barbara, what exactly do you mean? No, I'm interested. Remember, I've known Peter since he was a kid. And it seemed to me at Nat's party that he'd changed quite a bit—and very *suddenly*, I thought."

"Well, I don't know what he used to be like," Barbara said. "But he did the strangest thing the other day. You know, he's always popping in and out of the kitchen, making all kinds of oddball suggestions." She laughed a little. "I don't think he knows anything about cooking, because some of his ideas—!" and she rolled her eyes. "Soy-grit chocolate chip cookies! Or wanting to cut the baking time for a cake in half by doubling the oven heat! Whoo!"

Natalie laughed again. "You're absolutely correct, Bar-

bara. Peter Marcus has never ever done a *thing* in the kitchen in his entire life. Except eat, of course."

"Wait, Nat. Let's hear Barbara's story." Jerry poured himself another glass of wine in his deliberate way, raised his eyebrows at her and, on seeing her nod, leaned over and tipped the bottle, emptying it into her glass.

"Yes, Barbara," she said, "Let's hear it. We can add it to the Annals of Peter's Performances."

Barbara sipped at her wine. "Yesterday, he walked into the kitchen and said that he had to talk to me right away about something very important—crucial to the future of M & M's food group—"

Nat sat upright. And he hadn't said anything to *her*? What in hell was going on?

"He seemed very upset," Barbara went on. "He looked pale to me—no, no, Jerry, don't laugh, he really looked . . . *funny*. So I washed the flour off my hands and left a note for Millard saying I'd be back in a little while; and I went with Peter to his office," she hesitated, frowning a little, "where I spent almost an entire hour listening to him talk about his fifty-foot sloop and Israeli Bonds and the whole history of his marriage and divorce. Food never came up at *all*. I mean, he never even said 'English muffin.' And a couple of times, when I kind of hinted I'd like him to get to the point, he just waved me down. And there I was, with a new tofu cheesecake in the oven. If I let it burn, Millard would kill me; it took us two days to figure out the correct proportions and to find the proper oven heat for the darn thing and I could just visualize it, turning all black and horrible while I sat and heard about 'The Ex' . . . he never mentioned her name once, although I now know her bra size and her birth date and all her bad habits . . . *Anyway*," she finished breathlessly, "I finally got up and backed myself to the door, genuflecting a little bit, and then I kind of blurted: 'Oh Peter, my cake is burning, I can smell it,' and he said, 'Well, Barbara, you shouldn't come in here and chat with me if you have work to do in the kitchen.' And he picked up the dictaphone and turned his chair around and began to talk into it . . . As if I didn't even exist. Now, what do you think?"

"That *is* weird," Natalie said, "but no more than what he does every single day of the week. He's a genius, you know, and he thinks of at least three million things at a time. So he loses track of his point occasionally—"

"No, no, Nat," Jerry said. "I noticed at your birthday party . . . Peter's different. When I asked him how the billing is this year, instead of answering me he—"

"Sorry, everybody!" Mark's voice preceded him by a split second as he came bounding into the room, looking like an ad for sports clothes in his navy flannels and white cashmere sweater. There was something almost electric about him, Natalie thought. He very nearly crackled. In the quiet room, in the middle of their subdued, even conversation, he was almost a disturbance. "This client thinks I'm her shrink and that she can call me any time, day or night, and tell me that she's nervous about the arches in the living room or that she's been having bad dreams about her hot tub, or whatever!" He laughed and reached out for the wine bottle, looking briefly startled as he hefted it and found it empty. "Um—Barbara," he said, in a different voice, holding it out to her. "Not now, darling," Barbara said. "Jerry was right in the middle of something important."

With interest, Natalie studied Mark Valentine's face as it registered, in rapid succession, surprise, disbelief, and annoyance. Sure, I was right, he's a real tight-ass M.C.P. Amused, she wondered whether he'd go into the kitchen and get another bottle himself, betting herself *no*. And then smiled when he called, "Scott, bring in another bottle of the 'seventy-eight, would you?" I win again, she thought. It was a game she often played and usually won, if she was honest about it. But what did Barbara do with him? And then, inwardly, she chuckled, because what the hell else did you do with a gorgeous-looking tight-ass man? You took him everywhere and showed him off; and prayed he wouldn't get *too* pompous and righteous in company.

Leaning forward eagerly in her seat, Barbara had eyes only for Jerry. "Go on, go on, you asked him about the billing and what did he say?"

"He threw his arms around me and yelled, 'Jerry, baby.

You've always been like a big brother to me. My dad loved you, Jer, and so do I.' And then he asked me how I liked his new haircut."

"Oh come on, Jerry," Natalie protested. "That's not so weird. That's Peter." She nodded to Mark Valentine to top off her glass.

"No, no, Nat, you don't get it. Everything I said to him all evening long got the same kind of off-the-wall response. It was like talking to a deaf man; it really *was* weird . . ." He laughed briefly. "You hadda be there, I guess."

Mark helped himself to some hors d'oeuvres from the depleted array, hesitated—I'll bet he's debating whether or not he could bear to sit next to me, the bastard, Natalie thought—and then picked his way around her and the coffee table to sit beside his wife.

"That's not so crazy!" he announced. "I've had clients who could make him look like Mr. Normal. Remember, Barbara? One man wanted me to design the third floor of the most exquisite federal town house on the East Side into a dormitory for his cats! Can you believe it? And then—"

"If you had to work with him, Mark," Barbara interrupted, "you'd know what we're talking about. After all, if you don't like somebody's behavior, you don't have to take them on. He's our *boss*. I mean, with Peter you can't really *do* anything about it . . . My God, what he pulled on me at Natalie's birthday party was unbelievable!—"

The other three all turned total attention on her. Barbara blushed and looked down into her glass. "He—well, he kind of—well, all right let me say it right out. There we were, talking, chatting about nothing in particular, business I guess, and he just reached out and . . . grabbed my, well, my breast."

Natalie nervously began to laugh. All she could think of was, How come I didn't see it?

Mark flushed. He gulped at his drink, staring at his wife, and announced: "You have just quit M & M Advertising, Barbara. Come Monday, there'll be a Valentine for Mr. Peter Marcus, all right, but it'll be *me*!" And he jabbed a thumb into his own chest: "And why have you waited until now to tell me!"

"Oh Mark, for heaven's sake! Nothing happened. He grabbed me, that's all, he didn't *rape* me. I didn't tell you before now because I knew you'd overreact—as you are doing."

"Overreacting! Nobody puts his grubby hands on my wife!"

Natalie could no longer contain herself. "Oh, come *on*, Mark. You don't own Barbara's body, she does. It happened to *her*. You're kidding, aren't you? I mean, you're really not *that* much the macho male protector of virtue, are you?"

Swiftly, Barbara put in, "Of course he's not. Darling, Peter did a stupid thing, but it was only a second and Jake handled it perfectly. He zipped right over—because, honestly, I was so astonished, I was frozen to the spot—and just began talking funny stuff . . . You know how he does, Natalie . . . and walked me right away." She took a sip of her wine, smiling at her husband's grim profile, and said coaxingly, "I do believe that Peter forgot he'd even done it the minute I was gone. It was nothing, darling. It wasn't worth upsetting you over, honestly it wasn't."

Mark seemed almost not to hear her. He was glaring at Natalie. "Some of us," he grated, "are a little old-fashioned, yes."

"Has nothing to do with it," Natalie said with a flip of her hand. "Really, Peter's about three years old in some ways. He sees something he likes, he grabs. He makes a play, in some way, for every single woman who ever comes to work for M & M, and all you ever have to do is say no thanks and he doesn't bother you again."

Mark glowered. "And this man, whom you describe as a child of three, is Barbara's boss? And he's supposed to get everyone's respect? Come on, people, the guy's a nut! He needs to be kicked upstairs so you won't have to deal with him."

Natalie leaned across the coffee table and helped herself to more wine. "I think you'll find, Mark," she said, "that we're *all* nuts at M & M . . . chocolate-covered, of course. This is the price one pays for being in a nutty and creative biz."

Mark leaned forward too, facing straight into her. "See, that's what I object to. You say it's *creative* and all of a sudden, you advertising characters think you have carte blanche to behave any goddam crazy way you please! I say it's just a load of self-indulgence."

"I'll go for that," Jerry rumbled, leaning back into the soft suede and balancing his wineglass on his belly. "Once I figured that out, Mark—and believe me, it took me longer than it's taken you, about a dozen years—I got out! I mean, medicine has its mad scientists and its money-hungry specialists, but when you come right down to it, at least some of them are doing real good out there. I'd much rather be dealing with health than with cake mixes—Natalie will forgive me, I'm sure."

"The hell I will!" Natalie cried, sitting up straight. "Food is about as real as you can get in this world! And as for your miracles of modern medicine—I notice that they haven't found anything that will keep you awake long enough in the evening to spend some time with your family!" She drained her glass.

The room went so silent that the goblet made a sharp click as she put it down onto the table.

Brightly, Barbara said, "Let's all come into the dining room. Mark, darling, will you bring in another bottle?"

There was a general murmur of conversation and Natalie realized muzzily that she had embarrassed Barbara—too bad—but she didn't think what she'd said was so terrible. It was the truth, wasn't it? And besides, it wasn't as if she'd come out with the *real* truth of it. That would've stopped all conversation, permanently. Yessir, folks, Jerry Weber falls asleep every evening so he won't have to fuck his wife! Nice? Then he was hovering over her, offering his hand, so she let him help her up; but then shook him off. She could get *herself* into the dining room.

The dining room was also lovely—and lovingly done. You couldn't help but notice, Natalie thought with a touch of asperity. This house was almost too perfect. The room was warm and cozy, with glazed dark-green walls, a small arched fireplace, and an entire wall of French doors leading down into a floodlit garden, shrouded with thick white

drifts of snow, the dark night sky looking frosted from the ice crystals dancing in the light. "Oh, lovely," she said, feeling just the wee-est bit high: a little dizzy, actually.

At her side suddenly, Mark Valentine said, "Yes, Barbara and I stripped twenty layers of paint off these doors, inch by inch by inch. It took seven months to get it all off." His broad, blunt-fingered hand caressed the wood, the fingers curling in slightly, tenderly. He kept on, droning about original hardware and the integrity of wood and such; but Natalie wasn't attending. She stared at his sinewy hand, with the coarse dark hairs on the back, mesmerized. The way he felt the wood, lovingly, almost sexually, as though he were touching silk . . . or skin. Idly, she wondered how those muscular hands would feel. They looked so strong, so powerful.

"Hey, you two! There's *food* over here. You know . . . the real stuff, right, Jerry?" Barbara laughed.

"Now that I see it, I apologize for thinking that penicillin and open-heart surgery are any realer than this . . . this labor of, dare I say it, love."

The rich brown pieces of duckling were beautifully arranged on a cut-glass platter, covered with the black cherry sauce. Around the plate were thin curved slices of orange. There was wild rice with mushrooms, peas with water chestnuts, hearts of palm salad in a crystal bowl with carved ivory servers, a basket of tiny bite-sized rolls, gently steaming. A plate of butter curls, a cruet of homemade salad dressing. Mark walked around the table, filling oversized goblets with red wine. The mingled aromas were superb. Natalie felt her mouth begin to water; she hadn't realized how hungry she was.

It was all delicious. Barbara beamed upon them as they ate and asked for more and ate and drank and asked for yet more. "Mmmm," Jerry said through a mouthful of duck, "delicious." "Yes," Natalie said eagerly, lifting her wineglass high, "everything is just super, Barbara. Millard ought to be here."

"Well, you know, I thought about asking him; but I didn't know how he'd take it. I mean, he *is* my boss. I work under him. I couldn't figure out if it was the done thing.

But I did plan to ask Jake and Maureen . . . ha! That was dumb!"

"Why dumb?" asked Natalie. "Why didn't you? I'd have loved to finally meet the mythical Maureen." Her heart speeded up at the sound of his name. Damn! Why couldn't she get used to it? She'd already replaced him in bed with Jeff, after all, and Jeff was better. But what was Barbara saying?

"Wait, Barbara . . . I think I missed something. What did you say about Maureen?"

"That nobody's ever going to meet her, because they're separated. He's left her and is camping out in the cutest apartment!"

Now her heart was thudding wildly. He what? And was *what?* Jake? Left Maureen? After all these years? *And didn't even tell her?* Didn't have the balls to say, "Nat, I've left her." She hastily took a gulp of wine, trying to collect her thoughts and keep anything from showing on her face.

The rotten, no-good, one-way bastard! After all that time—! But he was supposed to stay married—unless *I* said it was time to leave her. And . . . wait a minute . . . "An . . . apartment, did you say? Funny, he didn't mention an apartment to me."

"On the West Side . . . not far from you, Nat. One of those tiny studios; I don't know how people live in one room, but I guess I'm spoiled . . ."

"Oh, then you've been there." It was hard to hear her own voice through the pulse that pounded in her ears; but she thought she had maintained the proper interested but not too interested tone.

"Oh, sure. Two or three times. I'm helping him furnish it—with a little help from the resident expert here." And she smiled at Mark, putting her hand out for him to grasp.

Natalie could not bear to look at her. She stared down at the dregs of food on her plate and felt sick. All that sharing with him . . . all those wonderful long talks . . . all the intimate little details they knew about each other, that only *they* knew about each other . . . All of it, gone, gone, and wasted, futile and meaningless! What did I *do*? she asked herself, staring mindlessly at the opposite wall, over Bar-

bara's head. What did I *do* that he should leave me? All those years, he said *we* should have got married. And now . . . it was Barbara, damn Barbara for . . . for what? It wasn't her fault that she was tall and blond and lovely. But it wasn't fair! She had counted on Jake. If there was one thing she had always known, it was that Jake would always be there for her. And now—no, no, it was unthinkable—and yet, it was true. He had told Barbara he was leaving Maureen. *And he didn't tell me!* They were supposed to tell each other everything. They were supposed to be each other's best friend! They—she felt as if she were choking.

She picked up her wineglass and pushed herself away from the table, murmuring excuses, and took herself to the wall behind Barbara, where a huge quilt had been hung. She pretended to look at it while she fought down nausea.

To her consternation, Mark came to stand beside her. "It's gorgeous, isn't it?" he said in a proprietary way. "We found it in New Hampshire. It's called log cabin . . . We started our collection with an heirloom of Barbara's—her great grandmother's quilt—but it's a bit too worn to display."

What the hell was he talking about? Nat thought. Oh. Of course. She managed a polite smile.

Suddenly, he craned over her shoulder. "Jen! Jennifer! Don't be in such a hurry. Come on in here and say hello to the Webers." Natalie thought briefly of correcting him—she had never taken Jerry's last name; she had a perfectly good one of her own was how she thought of it—but it wasn't worth it and besides, he was moving away from her, toward the doorway. His attention had shifted totally—thank God. She'd have a few minutes to pull herself together. "Come *on*, baby. I want everyone to see what a gorgeous creature I've fathered." He pulled into the room a reluctant teenager, her lank mouse-colored hair hanging straight from a center part, hiding most of her delicate face. Mark introduced her, and Jerry said heartily: "Well. No question about whose daughter that is." It was his stock comment, but this time, Natalie thought, he happened to be right. The two profiles with their high-bridged noses and round chins were identical. But the girl was extremely

slender, almost frail-looking—unlike her father, who exuded strength. Jennifer was a tall girl but so hunched-over, Natalie thought, that you couldn't see her shape. She was fair—even wan—and she wore absolutely no makeup whatever so that her eyebrows and lashes were nearly invisible. Some one, Natalie thought, should tackle that child, pin her to the ground and put makeup on her. Talk about hidden beauty!

"Oh, hi," Jennifer said. Her voice was soft and pleasant; she sounded a great deal like Barbara. But there was little life in it.

"Take something to eat," Mark urged. "There's plenty left and it's delicious."

She wrinkled her nose delicately. "No, I already had my yogurt."

"Yogurt! You call that dinner? Nonsense. Go take a piece of duck."

"Daddy—!" She gave him a meaningful look.

"Come on, you could use it . . . couldn't she, Natalie?" The color had risen on Mark's cheekbones and a little muscle at the base of his jaw began to jump. "You're looking so pale and scrawny."

Now the girl flushed. "I'm not hungry," she muttered. "Mom, tell him, will you?" But Barbara was engrossed with her dessert preparations and didn't hear. Jennifer slid her eyes to meet Natalie's. They were shadowed and unreadable. Did she want Natalie's support? It was hard to tell.

"Teenage appetites are notoriously finicky," Natalie said with a laugh. "Don't you remember, Mark?" Then she turned to the girl. "And teenagers' fathers are notoriously twitchy." She was rewarded with a grateful smile.

"Well, so long . . ."

"Oh no you don't, young woman. You stick around for a few minutes and help your mother."

Barbara, now turned and coming back to the table, bearing a tray with four soufflés and tiny cups of cappuccino, smiled and said, "Everything's done, Mark." She laughed and added: "Mark remembers the kitchens of his youth, when there were no dishwashers, no food processors, only women."

"Well, so long, I guess I'll go now." Like quicksilver, Jennifer seemed to slide out of the room.

As soon as the child left, the sick, empty feeling about Jake reappeared. Natalie reached out for her wineglass and took a deep drink, gratefully. She needed to relax, she needed to not think about Jake's betrayal. For that's exactly what it was—a betrayal. A lump of anger sat in the middle of her chest. She kept swallowing, secretly, but nothing was going to dissolve it. Maybe another drink . . . And she held her glass out to Mark.

"Wouldn't you rather have a brandy with your dessert?"

Natalie looked down at the pale-peach puffy confection in the ramekin, with its rivulets of garnet raspberry sauce. The sight of it gagged her. "No," she told Mark, "I think I'll skip dessert. Putting on a little too much weight." As soon as the words were out, she realized how stupid they sounded. If she were really worried about calories, she wouldn't be drinking so much wine. Oh to hell with it, to hell with him, to hell with everything!

Sipping at her drink, she smiled at Mark and said something nice about his daughter. "Thank you," he said. He then immediately turned to Barbara, who was talking with Jerry.

"But did you notice how skinny she's become?" he demanded.

"But if you're doing a voice-over, it seems to me—what? Who's skinny? *Me*, dare I hope?"

His lips thinned. "Your daughter, Barbara. Your child. Jennifer. She must have lost five pounds in the last week!"

"Don't be silly. She's exactly the same. Ever since she went vegetarian and decided that makeup is a male chauvinist trick she's been looking terribly pale. But it's just a phase, don't worry about it."

"Just one thing bothers me, Barbara. All this stuff—this vegetarian business and meditation routine and all that weirdo crap she's into—it's all started since you went to work—"

Barbara threw her fork down onto the plate with a loud clatter. "Now wait just a minute. First of all, Jennifer's 'weirdo crap,' as you call it, began when she was eleven years old—just like all kids. And in the second place, that's

about the tenth only-one-thing-that-bothers-you since I went back to work—"

"There's no 'back' about it, Barbara. You never worked before, remember? You were always here. You always said *we* were your career."

"Just shows how wrong a girl can be," Natalie laughed. She stared straight into Mark's eyes and smiled with amusement as he fought not to glare at her.

"I'm talking about *Jennifer*, Barbara."

Oh no you're not, Natalie thought. But this time she knew she'd better keep her mouth shut. She didn't want to start any trouble between them. Any *more* trouble.

"If it'll make you feel better, I'll spend a lot of time with her next weekend. Maybe I'll take her shopping . . . we'll do something, and I'll see what's what. But I'm sure she hasn't lost any weight . . . And, oh dear, this isn't company conversation."

"I want to hear more about Jake's new place," Jerry said in his best hearty social voice. Natalie could hear that he had been made uncomfortable by the bickering. Jerry didn't like to know about conflict, and this was his way of sidestepping any possibility of it. So of course, she thought with rancor, he would have to pick the one subject guaranteed to make *her* miserable.

"There's not much there at the moment," Barbara said with a laugh, "except a down sleeping bag . . . a table and two chairs and three thousand dollars' worth of stereo equipment. Why is it, do you suppose, that men are such suckers for *machinery*?"

Jerry threw his head back and laughed. "My dear Barbara," he said, "you have just described the completely furnished bachelor pad: a bed and a stereo! Sounds like he's really ready for any contingency. If you know what I mean."

Natalie held tightly onto the stem of her glass and wished her husband several miles away, and with his mouth shut. Any contingency! "And anyway, Barbara," she said sweetly, "it's not only men who go for machinery. Cuisinart. Hobart. Kitchenaid. Zero-King. Disposall. Need I go further?"

Barbara shrugged. "It just struck me funny that he bought a complete stereo system, with three tape decks *and* a cassette . . . and he doesn't have pot one. The man has nothing to eat from! He fed me Chinese food out of a carton!"

Fed her Chinese food! It conjured up a rather Sybaritic scene. Natalie slid a look at Mark. Wasn't he bothered at all? Evidently he felt it was all chummy-wummy and safe. Well, she could tell him a thing or two about Jake and Chinese food and when he particularly liked to eat it.

She pushed herself to her feet, aware suddenly that her balance was a little off. "Jerry," she announced. "We'd better get started. It's going to take us a long time to get home."

18 On the Telephone

"*Operator. What borough, please?*"

Natalie put her glass down and swallowed quickly. "Manhattan," she said softly into the mouthpiece. "A new listing. Miller. M-as in Mary . . ."

"Miller, yes. First name please?"

"Jacob. J, as in—"

"Jacob Miller, yes. Do you have an address?"

"Not exactly, Operator. Somewhere in the West seventies, I believe."

"Residence or business?"

At 2:30 in the morning, Natalie thought with disdain, would it be *business* for God's sake! "Residence."

"I have a Jacob Miller on West 78th Street."

"Yes . . . let's try that." She scribbled the number down, pressed her finger to disconnect, and began dialing immediately. Her pulse was racing madly, and that heaviness in the middle of her chest still sat there like a malevolent spirit.

It rang seven times—she counted each one—before a groggy voice croaked, "Yeah? Hello?"

"Jake! So it's true." She took another drink; her throat had gone suddenly dry.

"Nat?"

"That's right."

"For Christ's sake, Natalie, do you know what time it is?"

"Two oh seven and twenty-three seconds."

"In the fucking *morning*, Nat. We're not talking afternoon here; we're not talking postluncheon. We're talking middle of the night! What the hell are you calling me *now* for?"

"Because I only got home half an hour ago." Icily.

There was a deep sigh on the other end of the line. "Natalie. Out with it, okay? I'm sitting here on the floor, freezing my ass."

"What, not all curled up cozily in Barbara's sleeping bag?"

"Oh Jesus Christ!"

"That's right, you bastard."

"Natalie. Can we try to talk together like civilized human beings? Or may I go back to sleep?"

"You mean I get a choice? Funny, I thought you didn't want to talk to me at all."

"Of course, I want to talk to you. I was going to talk to you about . . . er . . . everything."

"Indeed? When?"

"Sometime. *Soon*. When I got it all sorted out. Jesus, Nat, aren't you sick and tired of living through The Trials and Tribulations of Jacob D. Miller? I figured, after all these years, you deserved a rest."

"Bull-shit!"

There was a humming silence. A sigh. Some small sounds, unidentifiable. She held her breath, as dread seized her by the throat. Then: "Okay, okay. That was unworthy of me . . . and of you, too. I didn't tell you because . . . well, because I didn't want to hurt you."

"So you sneak off with Barbara Valentine like some kind of Don Juan?"

"I wasn't sneaking."

"You were, you were! You were tippy-toeing by my office so you could avoid me . . . so I wouldn't see you or hear you. What do you call *that*? You and I haven't had *lunch* together for three weeks . . . not to mention our Mutual Aid Society, which seems to have been unilaterally disbanded . . . not to mention that I can hardly show my face at the Silver Streak because I'm always afraid I'm going to surprise you and your new *amour*!"

"Oh, you didn't have to worry about that. I take her to Boyce's."

Natalie bit her lips hard. She could barely breathe. "Oh you *are* a shit, Jake! After all our years together, in the end you have to butcher what we had, mutilate it and make a fucking mess out of it. You didn't have the balls to make a clean break with me—"

"Nat, for Christ's sake! What break? What you and I had . . . Jesus, as far as I'm concerned, it's still there! We're best friends, aren't we? I knew the whole idea of . . . Barbara . . . of somebody else would probably bug you in the beginning . . . yes, I guess you could say I was trying to avoid it as long as I could—"

"Jake, Jake, Jake! You took an apartment and never said a *word!* You left Maureen and never said a word! That's best friends? I say it's spinach and I say to hell with it!"

Again, that strange, empty silence. "Nat," his voice sounded muffled somehow as if he were talking into a handkerchief. And then the sound cleared. "I'm in love. I'm forty-four years old and for the first time in my life, I'm in love."

"And what was I, pray tell? Chopped liver?" She picked up the glass and drained it, stretching for the bottle.

"You *know* what you were . . . *are*. What we both were and are. We're in *like* with each other. It's very special, it's very good, but—"

"But," Natalie said in a strangled voice. "It's not Barbara Valentine, is that it?"

"I love her. I didn't want it. I didn't look for it, I didn't expect it, but there's nothing I can do about it."

"Then you're more of a fool than I thought, Jake, because Barbara is crazy about her husband."

"Now. *Now*, maybe, she's crazy about him. But I aim to change her mind."

"How?"

"How? Nat, Nat, need you ask? With the old Miller charm, of course."

"It won't work, Jake."

"We'll see."

"It won't. It won't. And anyway, she's all wrong for you. No sense of humor."

"Nattie, do me a favor, don't worry about it. I'll suffer, okay?"

"Jake, as your friend, listen to me. This is the worst mistake you've ever made. She'll make you miserable."

"Let me worry about that, okay?"

"You're willing, for the sake of a silly infatuation, to lose everything we had? I don't believe it."

"Nat, listen to me. It's now quarter to three. Not my ideal hour for deep discussion. Could we please put this off for another time?"

"Another time, shit! I'll never get you to talk again!"

"To tell you the truth, Nat, I'm not too eager to talk to you right *now*."

"Jake, for God's sake, don't do this to us!"

"Nat, I don't know any other way to say this except to say it. There isn't any *us* anymore. I'm in love with Barbara."

"Oh my God," she whispered. Her hand on the phone felt clammy with sweat. "I don't believe this. I'm betrayed and abandoned."

"Talk about bullshit . . ." Jake laughed. "Come on, Nattie, you're *married*—remember? Look—you've had too much to drink and it's late and you're overreacting."

"Oh come *on*—"

"No, no. It's true. Why don't you say good night and go to sleep, and we'll talk at the office on Monday."

"Promise?"

"Promise. Of course. We'll have a nice chat and you'll see—in the clear light of day, it'll all look different."

"Lunch?"

"Yes . . . oh wait, I think I may have something on—But don't worry, we'll find time sometime during the day."

Her heart hammering painfully, Natalie said, "Why don't we have a couple of drinks after work?"

"Well, um . . ."

"Goddammit, Jake, you're doing it again. We're still the best of friends, right? And we can't have a drink together! You can't even bring yourself to find time for me at

lunch? You *are* a bastard, aren't you? So long, Natalie, thanks for all those years of friendly fucking. I'll see ya around . . . maybe."

"Ah, Nattie . . ."

"Ah, Nattie, *shit*! Will you or won't you see me for lunch?"

He paused and then, in a carefully controlled voice, said: "Sure. But then how will you explain it to Jeffie baby? Won't he get lonesome?"

"You bastard!"

"Why're you getting mad? Everyone knows."

"I hate you!"

"Good night, Nattie dear. Try to get some sleep and clear your head, okay?"

"I hate you, I hate you, I wish I'd never listened to you when you came after me that time. I wish—!"

She choked off the words. There was nothing but a hum from the receiver. He'd hung up on her, he'd cut her off.

"Fuck you, Jake!" she whispered and then cuddling the receiver to her cheek as if it were a comforting hand, she began to cry.

19 A Friendly Chat

"*Are you nervous about the taste test,* Barbara?" Natalie asked.

"No, not at all. Cooking for my kids' school, it got so that I always automatically multiplied every recipe by a hundred and twenty-five . . . and besides, I've got two weeks. I'm thrilled that Millard trusts me enough to put me in charge. I've only been with M & M for a couple of months!"

"Yes, well, *he's* thrilled with *you* . . . ah, here comes the hostess. Time to take off our shoes."

They both shed their high heels and stepped into paper slippers lined up neatly by the doorway of the main dining room. The hostess, a diminutive Japanese woman in traditional dress, smiled tightly at them and motioned with her sheaf of menus as gracefully as if they had been gold-leaf fans. "Do you wish chairs?"

"No," Natalie said decisively. "We'd like the cushions . . . you don't mind, Barbara?"

"This is fine." Barbara settled herself down onto the large pillow on the floor, then made a wry face. "If I can figure out what to do with my *legs*."

"Oh, I keep forgetting what long legs you have . . . Shall we start with sushi?"

Barbara looked surprised. "I love sushi. But I thought we were going to have tempura . . . you know, to compare with the Disco Din-Dins."

"Well, we'll have both, that's all. And sake, please. That I *need*."

In a moment, a bottle of the warm wine had been placed on the shiny low table and both tiny porcelain cups had been filled. Natalie finished hers in one gulp and refilled the cup. "I must remember how lethal this stuff can be," she remarked.

"Yes, when Jake and I had lunch here, I had entirely too much. It sneaks up on you."

"Oh, Jake brought you here? What a shame. If I'd known, we could have tried one of the other Japanese restaurants. You probably ought to try three or four tempuras before you and Millard decide on yours . . ." She sipped at her wine, lowering her eyes. "Although I should have known, of course. This place has been a favorite of *ours* for years."

Deep-red lacquered plates and bowls were brought, and then the food, and for a few minutes they busied themselves with it. Then Barbara said, "Oh, you and Jake must have had a wonderful time together when you were both single."

"His was the first face I saw at M & M . . . other than Jerry's, of course. But Jake was a contemporary, a peer, another peon so of course we became pals."

"Has he changed much? He looks so like my idea of Puck: all arms and legs and curls and flashing eyes. It's hard to believe he's over sixteen."

Natalie gave a short laugh. "Indeed. I sometimes wonder if he *is* . . . over sixteen, that is. Yes, we had good times together." She smiled and once more dropped her gaze, concentrating on her food. "That was a lovely evening we spent with you last weekend. The food was marvelous, the wine was marvelous, the ambience was ditto."

"Oh, thank you. We loved having you. And it was good for Mark to see that all advertising people aren't phonies and ogres . . . oh . . . but you know what I mean, Nat. He's so dead set against my working, he keeps muttering all the clichés. And there you were, charming and lovely. And Jerry—well, he's a *dear*, a big bear, we just loved him. But of course, the best part was over brandy, when he and Mark discovered they both speak ohms and amps."

"Yes, that did go on for rather a long while, if I recall." Natalie laughed. "I'm not so sure I recall *anything* too clearly from the end of the evening. I think I may have had just a wee bit too much to drink."

"It didn't seem so to me. You were just about the same as usual. Witty and penetrating."

"Oh Barbara, for heaven's sake!"

"Well, I'm sorry but that's how I think of you. Is there any reason not to tell you? You're what I want to be when I grow up!"

Natalie stared. "*Why*, for Christ's sake?"

"You're so smart . . . well, you *are*, and I've always admired women who are smart that way: shrewd and sharp. I get the feeling you never miss anything, and whenever someone needs an idea fast, who do they come to?"

Natalie put her hands up. "Okay, okay. That I admit. An idea a minute . . . not that they all work, mind. But, yes, the Queen of the Brainstorm I am . . . oh miss, more sake, do you mind? And, *I* envy *you* because you're tall and blond and gorgeous and curvaceous and when men look at you, they drool, even Millard. You're the princess in the story books, Barbara. There. Now do you think we've managed to embarrass each other enough?"

They looked at each other, half smiling. Then Barbara reached over and patted Natalie's hand. "I'm not embarrassed. I'm . . . oh, terribly flattered. I always feel so . . . inadequate when I watch you in action. And Jake's always talking about you, and everything he says makes me look at myself to see if I'll ever be able to measure up!"

Natalie poured more sake and gulped it down. "What a nice buzz this stuff gives you," she remarked. She let out a long breath. "I don't think you need worry about measuring up to *me* in Jake's eyes. He *likes* you."

"Oh, and I like him, too. What fun he is. I never did get to know many boys, not as friends you know. When I was little, girls stuck together, and growing up with three sisters, it was a female world I lived in. And then, when I got old enough to date, they didn't want to be friends. They wanted to neck and grope and make out . . ." She giggled. "Oh Lord, do you remember *making out*? Oh, the grubbi-

ness of it all . . . in the balcony of the State Theatre on Saturday night."

"The smell of bubble gum and popcorn. . . ."

"Oh absolutely, and dust and teenage passion." They both began to laugh. "And I met Mark almost right away in college, and well, that was the end of boys for me. So running around with Jake, helping him furnish his apartment and listening to his troubles with Maureen—"

"He talks about Maureen? Are you kidding me?"

"No, of course he talks about her. They're going to be divorced and she wants alimony and he says nuts to her, that she's a highly paid executive and—"

"She *is*? Do you happen to know what she looks like?" Then, in answer to a puzzled look, Natalie added, laughing, "I kid you not, Mrs. Valentine. Jake's wife has been the Main Mystery of the M & M Copy Department ever since he married her . . . which, by the way, nobody knows when that was. So you are really being treated royally. I told you: he likes you."

"Gee, I can't imagine why . . . I mean, why pick me to tell all this stuff to, if he's never told his old friends?"

Natalie poured for them both. "He . . . uh . . . let us say, he more than likes you."

"Oh, Natalie! No! Oh that's *ridiculous*!"

"Is it? Is it really? I guess I ought to know, Barbara, because Jake and I were lovers. We were lovers for a long, long time."

"I . . . I can't say I'm surprised. But of course, you aren't now." Barbara was blushing.

"No, we're not. But why do you say *of course* . . .?"

"Well . . . Jerry. Your husband. You're *married*."

Natalie threw her head back and howled, then cut it off abruptly, coughing. She drank several of the tiny cups of wine very quickly and it finally subsided. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Of course, you'd believe in fidelity and all that stuff. But then, you've loved only one man your whole life."

Barbara smiled. "I—I won't ask any more. I don't think I want to know, it wouldn't be fair."

"Why not? I don't mind. If you want to know, I'll even tell you who my lover is now . . . and, if you're *really* interested, who's next after *he* flies the coop."

"No, I don't really want to know. And, Natalie, I don't think you really want to tell me either. Maybe . . . well maybe you've had a bit too much sake. It *does* creep up on you and then hit you like a ton of bricks . . ."

After a moment of silence: "You're right. Of course. And you're also very sweet, Barbara. Sometimes I'm a horse's ass."

"Aren't we all!" Barbara picked up a shrimp and nibbled idly at it. "I had an abortion a couple of years ago, all legal and everything, but I've never told Mark."

"What? You did it all by yourself? But why? It wasn't—forgive me—someone else's?"

Barbara laughed. "No, of course it wasn't someone else's baby! It was Mark's. And he would have been ecstatic. He keeps saying he'd have six or seven. He's got a thing about babies . . . Well, of course, it's easy for him to have a thing about babies . . . isn't it? He doesn't have to take care of them or feed them or train them or worry about them or make sure they have friends. All he has to do is come home and admire them and pat himself on the back for being their father . . . oh dear, that sounds bitter, doesn't it?"

Now Natalie patted Barbara on the arm. "It's okay, sweetie. I've been there. Jerry would come all over sticky-gooey with love and devotion everytime he saw me working like a goddam dog with the baby. The more bottles and shitty diapers and ringing phones I had to contend with—the more harassed I became—the more he felt overcome with the purity and sweetness of motherhood. . . . Yes, I've been there. It used to make me want to *kill*."

"Anyway, I went to a private clinic. It didn't take long, and one of my friends came with me. I felt a bit sorry for myself—I'm so used to having Mark's support at any important moment; we did Lamaze so he could be in the delivery room when the kids were born, and that was when you had to fight the hospital tooth and nail to do it. The worst of the clinic was the kids, the little girls of fifteen and sixteen . . . no, I'm lying. The little girls were dreadful. The worst thing for me was the subterfuge, the lies. I have to keep reminding myself all the time that Mark doesn't know. I'm still terrified that it'll slip out one day."

"And, if it does . . . ?"

"Oh, he'd *kill* me! He'd just kill me!"

Natalie stared at Barbara for a minute and then said, "You know, when you said that, you sounded just like a kid talking about her father . . . oh shit, I'm sorry. None of my business."

Barbara sipped her sake. "Well . . . oh, I know what you mean. Yes, Mark is the dominant one in our marriage. Not actually fatherly, but . . . well, things have always been done his way. And I've always *liked* doing things his way. I mean, why not? It's *his* house and *his* business and *his* money . . ." She stopped, bit her lower lip and said, almost ruminatively, "Although, of course, that's not true now, is it? I'm making money. Natalie?" she added in an entirely different, sharper tone.

"Yes?"

"Could I live on my salary? I mean, pay the rent and eat and all?"

"Christ, I doubt it. Isn't that awful? But entry-level jobs are meant for women like you, who don't *need* to live on it; or girls like Debbie, who still live with Mommy and Daddy. Well," and she laughed merrily, "you could always ask Jake to let you move in with him! I think he'd jump at the chance!"

"Oh, that's ridiculous!" But she looked very thoughtful, her brows drawn together. "Although, I guess I could, if I had to. That's nice to know."

"Then you *do* know how he feels about you." Natalie smiled brightly and drank.

"Oh, I guess he might have a teeny crush on me . . . Nothing as important as what he had with *you*, Nat, that I can tell you with dead certainty. It's nearly two-thirty, do you know that? I'd better get back or Millard'll k—" Here, she stopped and giggled. "To hell with Millard, right? Let's have dessert!"

"Right on! That's how you do it. You start with Millard and who knows where it all might end . . . ?"

"True," Barbara agreed, her eyes still calm and thoughtful. "Who knows?"

20 A Test of Taste

"*Would you believe I'm nervous?*" Barbara said, and laughed. She tucked a wisp of hair behind one ear and grinned at Millard. "It's like having company at your house for the very first time."

"Except, of course," Millard replied, "you'd never invite *these* people, my dear. Their manners!"

Barbara looked around the kitchen, pleased by what she saw. She had rented two long banquet tables and there they were, lined up across the kitchen, draped with lengths of blue batik cotton right down to the tile floor. There were white Chinet plates, white plastic forks, white paper napkins, all laid out in orderly rows. Two huge *bains-marie* sat on each table, waiting to keep the food hot. She had put out bowls heaped with soda crackers, several cases of chilled ginger ale, six bottles of chilled Soave, and lines of sparkling clear plastic glasses. Her hands fairly itched to put a floral arrangement on each table, but that would be silly. This wasn't a dinner party—as Millard had made clear from the very beginning, "nothing must interfere with their darling palates and nothing should influence their darling opinions . . . You can't have anything with a scent of its own, you just can't." This was a taste test. And a taste test around M & M was very serious business. She had thought of little else these past two weeks. Two weeks ago, Millard—more serious than usual—had sat her down

at the table with a cup of hot chocolate and said, "Barbara, my dear, it's time for you to try your new wings. I am putting you in charge of our next big taste test."

"Our next big *what*?"

"Remember that falafel recipe we worked so hard to develop?"

"Very funny! How could I forget it! With Paul Hasahni running in here every three hours, sniffing and making faces and telling me once more that the Hasahnis will not allow their bread to be part of any frozen falafel dinner that doesn't taste authentic—like Grandma's."

"Well," Millard said, making a face, "in case you thought that developing the recipe was the end of it, I have news for you. Now comes the taste test. You see, my dear, Craig Parsons, president of Disco Din-Dins and, incidentally, a dear friend of mine, has taken a new Japanese lover and wants the next new Din-Din to be tempura. Natalie, on the other hand, has had the admittedly bright idea to package a Near East dinner and to include that well-known Ali Baba pita bread—thus, you see, tying two clients together, making a lot of money, and creating more billing for Marcus and Morrisey. . . . Now do you understand all?"

"No, but never mind. Just tell me what I have to do."

He laughed a little and began ticking off items on his fingers, while she scribbled away madly on a stray piece of paper. Among the things she had to arrange by today were: schedule two hundred agency employees to come through the kitchen to take a sample of falafel, then clear their palates and take a bit of veggie tempura, again clear their palates, and, lastly, fill out a card that said which they liked better, and why; . . . hire temps to help out; . . . make up the questions for the cards; . . . write a memo to go to the two hundred employees; . . . get the tables and all the equipment together; . . . set up; . . . help prepare the seemingly tons of falafel and tempura; . . . and . . . after that her mind had just gone blank.

Complicated though it had been, today was D-Day (or, as Jake liked to call it, D-D-D Day), everything was done and she was still sane. And, by george, she had done a damn good, professional job!

As if reading her mind, Millard said, "You've done a splendid job, Barbara, dear. I'm sorry you had to work so late all those nights, but that's the way the marron glacé crumbles!"

"Oh, not you too!"

"Jake Miller's not the only one who can hang around a kitchen making bad jokes, you know . . ."

"Oh, Millard—!" She thought she saw something in his eyes—amusement, or knowledgeability, or something—but it was so hard to tell with Millard. He kept his face impassive almost all the time—until he decided to throw one of his world-famous fits, in which case he pulled out all the stops and gave what could only be called A Performance.

"Speak of the devil . . ." Millard murmured, as Jake came waltzing in—literally waltzing, his arms around an almost life-sized cardboard bikini-clad girl—singing loudly "It's only a Paper Moon."

"Would you mind, Jake, please?" Millard's voice was pleasant, but Barbara could tell that he was irritated. Well, that was Jake for you. He often didn't know when to stop. Or even, sometimes, when not to start in the first place. It was *her* taste testing, after all, and her first big responsibility and he knew it damn well; and she'd told him every day for the past two weeks how nervous it was making her. And here he was, fooling around on her precious time!

"Where'd you get that thing?" she said, trying not to sound too acerbic. "Because wherever you found it, please take it back to the same place immediately."

He stopped and gave her one of his wide-eyed looks. "Aw gee. And I planned this whole thing so carefully . . . it took me all morning to talk her out of the account exec for the San Juan Queen Hotel . . . and it's not even our client, it's Y & R's. And I thought it would make you laugh and forget your troubles . . . All right, all right, I'm going! And I'll dump this broad; but I'll be back—*alone*."

"But not one minute before one o'clock. You're in the one o'clock group."

"Twelve o'clock, one o'clock, what difference?"

"What *difference*? I spent hours working out a schedule, and don't you dare do anything to mess it up! Which is exactly what you are doing right now because my first

group is due in here in," she consulted her wristwatch, "twelve minutes." He took the poster by an arm and dragged it after him, as if it were a reluctant child. She couldn't help giggling. Relenting a bit, she called after him, "Oh and Jake . . . please be funny at one o'clock because, by that time, I'm going to *need* it."

By 1:00—or, to be more precise, at 12:58—80 M & Mers had filed through the kitchen. First, the time buyers and then account execs on all nonfood accounts, then the Art Department and finally, copywriters, nonfood.

The four young men from New York Hotel and Restaurant School had worked out well. It was a relief not to have to think about them. They just zipped around, clearing away all the dirty stuff, washing what needed to be washed, putting away what needed to be put away, throwing away what needed to be thrown away, and being generally useful. Funny . . . it had never occurred to Millard that they could use extra hands from a professional school. He'd always hired grudging temps. These kids were delighted to work. And they were going to be sent back to school loaded with Disco Din-Dins, pita bread, eggs, boxes of Lovin' Oven, and a glowing letter from Ms. Barbara Valentine. All those years of catering for the St. Ann's luncheons had taught her that there's no such thing as too many *good* workers when you're feeding a multitude.

Jake, of course, should have been in with that last group, the copy people, nonfood (or N-F as she called them). His steel-belted tire writers had clumped in and taken tastes and tried to look very intelligent as the unfamiliar flavors registered. No, was that fair? They were regular guys, Ivy League, creative, nice, with ambitions and anxieties like everyone else. Why was she thinking about them as if they were a lesser breed than the food group?

She checked just briefly on the fellows from the college, a quick glance—they were bustling about, brightly, cheerily, just loving every minute of this adventure—and scanned the long table. Enough cutlery, enough plates and one of the guys was bringing out the next batch of heated minimeals. Would she ever again in her life be able to stand the smell of fava-beans-with-Mideast-spices? She'd

had to say *that* particular phrase about 80 times, one for each "What's in this stuff?" Honestly, *men*! No sense of adventure at all!

"We need more napkins," she said and got a bright, "Yes ma'am!" Oh, it was wonderful, being in charge of a smoothly running operation. She'd forgotten the headiness of bossing. She moved over to the small table at the end, where Mary Claire and Debbie were collecting the cards and tallying the votes.

"Do we have a winner yet, Debbie?"

"Not yet. But I know what *I* like . . . the Japanese one! Oh, dear!" And her eyes became very big and round. "Mr. Hasahni better not hear me!"

"Mr. Hasahni isn't here yet, so don't worry. And besides, you don't *have* to like falafel, just because it's the recipe of the great-great-grandmother of one of our clients!"

"No, that's right. That's Tommy Thoms's job."

Barbara laughed. That little Debbie was sharp as a tack. She wasn't going to stay someone's secretary very long. "And besides," Barbara added, "it's not as if the Hasahnis will have anything to do with the falafel, once it's a Disco Din-Din . . . it's just Paul Hasahni's craziness. . . . The only part they'll play is that each Din-Din will feature an authentic Ali Baba pita bread."

"I know, I know," Debbie said. "He told me, too."

From up the hall now, they could all hear what sounded like a loudspeaker, calling: "Tasting . . . one, two, three . . . tasting!" And in they all marched, the food people, led by the main special exception himself complete with Arab headdress. They were, as usual, in their inimitable fashion, acting crazy. They were all actually marching, Jake with a baton (where did he find all his props?), Jeff's arm linked into Martha J's, Tommy Thoms grinning from ear to ear and matching steps with Natalie, and bringing up the rear, six or seven, or was it eight, Hasahnis, all sniffing the air and looking anticipatory.

"Oh God!" Barbara thought. All of those Hasahnis at once! She had managed to have dealings only with Paul, who always twirled his beautiful curling mustache at her

and leered but was really very nice—unlike Roland, who would not stop proposing marriage and other indecent acts. So she turned to Paul when they all came in and grabbed his arm. "You taste it first, okay?" she whispered. He grinned at her, saying, "Don't worry, sweetheart, you've created a *real* falafel. Well, why not? After all, I showed you how!" And immediately headed for the tempura. She shook her head at him. Honestly, all these men were perfectly crazy and unpredictable. In a minute, he was shouting over at her, "Hey! this is terrific tempura!"

"My dear Paul, that's not what you're here for," Millard scolded. He strode over to the table and fussed around the trays, talking under his breath nonstop to Paul the whole time. In a moment, Paul threw up his hands and shouted, "All right, all right. *You*—" and he gestured imperiously at his brothers and cousins and father, "See if Mr. Littlefield and Mrs. Valentine have cooked up a real good authentic falafel!" They all fell to, throwing their heads back, eyes closed, identical posture, as they masticated carefully and rhythmically.

From behind her, Jake's familiar voice said, "Have you ever before seen eight mustaches moving in such perfect unison?"

"Allah be praised," Barbara muttered back, "nobody's said 'yuck' yet."

"How do you say 'yuck' in Lebanese?"

"I'm not sure. Is '*feh*' Lebanese?"

Jake chuckled. "*Feh*, my dear Barbara, is universal . . . but who in his right mind would use it with *you*? You, who are so lovely, so glamorous, so delicious, so—"

"Stop it, you're embarrassing me!" She was giggling, the color rising in her cheeks. "Someone will think you mean it."

"Yes," came Natalie's voice, "someone will think you mean it, Jacob. Do stop stirring up the cooks. And take that thing off your head." Smoothly, she stepped between them and, smiling, turned to Barbara. "What a wonderful job you've done with this. No taste test has ever gone so well before!"

She turned to Jake, who had rid himself of the headdress

and was running his fingers through his hair. "Really, Jake, could you believe? I tell the kitchen on a Thursday that we must have two new Din-Din's within a month and within a month, we've got 'em! And Millard says it's because there's finally someone *else* intelligent in the kitchen with him. What he *really* said, if you want to know, is that he's always needed someone totally overqualified for the job of assistant, and he's finally got her." She held both Barbara's arms and, standing on tip-toe, gave her a loud kiss on the cheek. "That's the *Croix de guerre* of M & M . . ."

"Me next, Nattie, 'cause I just got a new spark plug account, and isn't that worth something?"

Natalie turned and gazed coolly at him. "It's worth something," she said in an even tone. "Good for you." And she gave him a little salute, turning instantly back to Barbara. "Oh would you look at that," she said in a totally different voice, huskier, "*What* is its name, do you think?"

"What?" Both Barbara and Jake followed her gaze to the door, where Peter Marcus was standing with a good-looking stranger.

"Ha! you mean the handsome man," Jake said. "The way you were talking, I expected to see a dog or some inanimate object."

Natalie glared at him. Ignoring that, Jake went blithely on. "I don't see," he babbled, "why you would even notice him, Nattie. I mean, what does he have that I don't—besides six inches more of height, snow-white hair, a fifty-dollar barber, a noble brow, and dimples . . . although, come to think of it, I have dimples . . . If you're really nice, Barbara darling, and we get friendly enough, I'll let you see them—!"

"Ha, ha," Natalie said, looking irritated. "That's really no longer funny, Jake. All that adolescent humor does begin to wear thin, you know. I think I'll just amble over there and meet Snow White and see if he's worth fitting into my schedule." And squaring her shoulders automatically, she strutted away, her narrow hips swaying just the littlest bit.

"Atta girl, Nattie, give him the old hundred-dollar come-on . . ." Natalie heard Jake say, following it with his best

aren't-I-a-naughty-boy laugh. She didn't wait to hear if Barbara laughed, too, just hurried on trying to ignore the knot of anger Jake always managed to put in her belly these days. Go fuck yourself, Jake! she thought with a kind of acid pleasure. She wondered for just a second whether he had taken Barbara to bed yet and then pushed it quickly to the back of her mind.

She marched right up to them and planting herself in front of the white-haired stranger, said, "Well, hell-*lo*. Are you a new client, I hope? I'm Natalie Simon . . . as Peter would have told you, had I waited like a good girl for him to introduce us. But, as Peter will also tell you, I'm not a good girl . . . not very often!" And she put out her hand.

He hesitated and then took her hand lightly, frowning a little. "I'm terribly sorry . . . Have we met before?"

Oh God, she thought, looking up merrily into a pair of the coldest, most distant dark eyes she had ever had the misfortune of gazing up into. He was not interested. But he was *so* not-interested, it was as if he had blanked her out.

She kept the smile on her face, although it felt stiff already. "No, of course we haven't met. You're a perfect stranger." And she laughed gaily.

He gave her a polite smile and turned to Peter. "Didn't you say we should join in the test?"

Natalie longed to slap that self-satisfied, handsome face. Who did he think he was dealing with anyway? "I," she said as sweetly as she could, "am the copy chief of the food group. And you are—?"

Peter, up until now fidgeting and peering in all directions, suddenly focused in on them. "Ah, Natalie. There you are. My little star. Come from afar . . . This is Adam from Eden's Dream . . . natural food it seems . . . let's see you beam . . . my dear food queen . . ." He broke off abruptly, grinning, obviously delighted with his own cleverness. Natalie felt a jolt of shock. In the past, Peter had always saved his eccentricities for the family: with clients, he'd always been extremely careful. Oh a little bit fey, perhaps, but nothing even approaching this performance. She darted a quick look at him, to see if he were fooling, or putting them on. But he just looked pleased. As for this

Adam person, you could look in vain for any sign that he thought anything was the least bit bizarre. His face was devoid of any expression whatsoever; it was as blank as next week's newspaper.

To herself she said, when at first you don't succeed . . . and put a twinkle back into her eyes. "Adam," she said, "do you prefer to be addressed in light verse? Because I can do it, for better or verse . . ." And waited for an answering spark. It was not there.

"Excuse me," he said, turning away. "I see Paul Hasahni. We do business together."

Natalie watched his retreating back, fighting a rising feeling of hurt. It was like being 17 and having the boy you admired just look right through you. Ridiculous, that's what it was. She swallowed hard.

"Struck out, Nattie, did you? There's always a first time —even for a home-run hitter like yourself."

She turned to stare at Peter. "Can you repeat that in rhyme?"

"Sure. Nattie bats one thousand most days . . . And if she doesn't, the guys are gays . . . How's that?"

"Not up to your highest standards." She eyed him. He was as dapper and twinkly as usual. Perhaps she had been imagining how bizarre he sounded just before. In her head, she had been preparing herself to quietly get him out of the kitchen without anyone else noticing what was going on; and here he was, just as normal as blueberry pie. Or, at least, as normal as Peter Marcus ever got.

And then Millard called him to come taste and suddenly she was standing alone. How strange it felt; she had nothing to do, nothing she had to do and she couldn't stand it. She headed for the table, where the bottles of chilled wine had been put out. She thought of going to chat with Barbara, but Barbara was on the phone.

It was Mark. Barbara felt a bit irritated. All those years, he'd made it a cardinal sin for her to call *him* at the office. And when she first came to M & M, he called her all the time—until she finally told him, "For heaven's sake, Mark, I'm working in a *kitchen*. Timing is often critical, don't you understand? I can't always talk to you. And besides . . ."

But she knew if she tried to say anything about her work being important or anything like that, she'd get exactly nowhere. But finally she'd got it across to him, and lately he'd stopped calling for every little thing. But now, right in the middle of her first . . .

"Yes? What is it?" She tried to keep her voice pleasant and neutral, but she could hear that little edge to it. "We haven't finished the testing yet, Mark."

"You'd better get home right away."

"What are you *talking* about? What's wrong?" She turned so that she faced into the wall and bent her head down.

"It's Jennifer. She's home again. Apparently she fell asleep in class . . . anyway, that's what *she* says. You'd better go see what's wrong."

"I can't." She bit her lower lip and thought quickly. This was the third time in two weeks that Jen had left school in the middle of the day saying she didn't feel well. The first time it happened, she had raced right home by cab, to find Jen fast asleep and cool. And when she awoke later, she made herself a heavy milkshake in the blender and looked amazed that anyone was in the least bit worried. The second time, she took her to Dr. Stillman for a complete checkup. And in the end, he said, "This girl is about three pounds underweight and that's it. She's a perfect physical specimen, and there's no reason for her to feel weak. Is there anything . . . uh . . . more emotional that's bothering her?"

Barbara hadn't even repeated that part to Mark. He would have said, "You see? I told you she needs you at home. I keep telling you it's all changed since you started that job." She didn't need *that*, not with so much happening at work.

"What do you mean: *can't*? This is your *child* we're talking about!"

Barbara wet her lips and took a deep breath. "Mark, I came home the first time and I've taken her to the doctor. She's fine. She's just going through a phase. I told you, I'm running my first taste testing today and I'm right in the middle of it now. I *can't* leave."

"Well, we can't just let her come home sick from school without checking on her."

"You're five minutes away by taxi. *You* go check on her."

"I'm working on a multimillion-dollar deal, Barbara."

"How do you know I'm not?" she breathed, forcing herself to sound calm. It was all she could do not to scream into the phone or slam it down.

"Oh Barbara, come on!"

Again, she dragged in breath, surprised that it hurt her chest. "Mark, listen to me. Jennifer is fine. There's nothing wrong with her. You're putting pressure on me and it's not fair. I have a job to do and I'm supposed to be doing it right now and you're keeping me from it and I really must get back. If you're so terribly concerned, *you* go see her. I can't. I'm sorry, but we'll have to discuss this later." She hung up and then stood there, unable to believe her own behavior, her heart thumping wildly as if she had just performed a superhuman feat of strength. She held her hands out in front of her, watching them tremble.

"Whatever it is, just tell Jake and we'll make it all better." She looked up to find a glass of wine being held out to her. Gratefully, she took it, gulped at it, grinned at him and said, "You are a blessed puckish wonderful mind-reading person, Jake, has anyone ever told you that?"

"Puckish? Puckish? Not since last Thursday at three A.M. in my dreams. But then, I've always said you are the girl of my dreams."

"Well, right now, Jake, you are the answer to a maiden's prayer. I needed you at this moment and you magically appeared."

He stroked an imaginary mustache and squeezed her shoulder. "I will do such magic for you, my dear," he murmured in a fake Hungarian accent, "that you will be filled with wonder and delight."

"You know," she remarked, half to herself, "I could do with a little more wonder and delight . . ."

"Good. Then come with me when this thing is all over and we'll have wonderful drink and delightful dinner."

Barbara stared past him at the now familiar faces of the

food group. Their very familiarity gave her a warm surge of contentment. She belonged here; there was no doubt about it. These were her people, her friends . . . yes, her *friends.* And the thought of going on the subway, of braving the hordes, only to have to face Mark's tight-lipped superiority . . .

"You're on," she told Jake. "I'd love drinks and dinner. And now"—she added with a grin, her mood abruptly lifting—"save me from Roland Hasahni, will you? Here he comes and there's marriage on his mind!" Indeed, the roly-poly Roland was bouncing right toward them, his curly mustache fairly twitching with anticipation.

"I always told Papa Hasahni it was dangerous to let one of those boys go beyond the age of puberty without a wife! Well, how shall we do it, my dear? Go into a clinch—which I myself would prefer—or pretend we're working? Never mind: I just had a thought. You disappear into wherever beautiful women disappear when they can't leave the room; and I will . . . ah Roland, over here, would you? I need to ask you something about Lebanon and Syria." And his long legs working like a pair of scissor blades, he reached Roland quickly.

Barbara wasted no more time and hustled back to the tables, where the rest of the Din-Dins were rapidly disappearing, bite-sized piece by bite-sized piece.

"When are you going to do something about Roland?" Natalie was saying to Papa Hasahni, between gasps of laughter. They had all been standing close enough to watch the little scene with amused interest and now she laughed as Roland tried to turn his chubby self around to follow his beloved, at least with his eyes, only to be stymied over and over again by Jake's rapid-fire double talk.

"What *should* I do about Roland?" The older man shrugged deeply and expressively. "I have tried everything. He wants only a blonde. Offered him the Ahmed second cousin's daughter. She wasn't so bad, what's so terrible about a little mustache? She's a wonderful cook and has nice big hips, give him plenty of babies."

Paul, walking up to them, rolled his eyes. "Roland again? Unh! The baby of the family always gets spoiled. The minute I turned twenty-one, I was expected to marry

and start making grandchildren . . . and I did. Roland's what, twenty-eight already, and he's allowed to make a fool of himself over every yellow-haired woman he sees. *Feh!* By the time I was his age, I already had my five and Fatima said, 'No more!' " He chortled and leaned in close to Natalie. "Nat, I'm really sorry about him . . . and Mrs. Valentine, I mean. Is it a terrible pain in the arse?"

"No, no, no. In fact, I think it's probably added a bit of spice to her life. Poor lady, living over there in Brooklyn Heights in a beautiful town house with her handsome husband and two perfect children . . . life must have been dull. Having a handsome Arab chase you around the kitchen has *got* to make a good story for cocktail parties."

"Is that what *you* did? Regale your friends with tales of passionate Paul? Only kidding, Pa, only kidding."

"Humph!" the old man snorted. "I'm going to get a soft drink if you two kids are going to talk sexy!" And chuckling to himself, he took himself off.

"Shame on you, Paul. You promised we'd never mention it." But Natalie couldn't help laughing at Paul's expression, a mixture of lust and humor. "One wonderful Arabian Night . . ." she murmured and was rewarded with a pinch on her arm.

"Now that I've got you in the mood . . ." Paul said, "So tell me, Natalie, what do you think? Will a Lebanese Din-Din go or not?"

For just a moment, she had a flash of resentment . . . hate, almost. She looked at his handsome, fleshy face with the dark, dark eyes. Even back then, when they were both younger, he'd had this infuriating way of coming on to her and then, when she was all purring and ready, suddenly changing the subject and becoming all business. But that was a long time ago, she reminded herself, and their relationship had been distantly friendly and strictly business for years now. Still . . . it hurt to have someone suddenly look at you as if he had forgotten you were female.

Mentally, she shook herself. It was not her best day, so far. Mustn't let them get her down, though. "I'm not sure yet," she answered Paul. "Personally, I'd prefer it. I'm so accustomed to Near Eastern spices, it all seems familiar and terrific to me. But we'll have to see how other people

react to the taste—I mean, those who've never tried it before . . . now, *stop* that, Paul, we're not teenagers, you know."

"I'm sorry, Nat. I couldn't resist."

She suppressed another wave of anger. What *was* the matter with her anyway? But it was getting to be a bore, never knowing whether you were a sexual creature, female, or a neuter executive person. These men couldn't seem to make up their minds. And why, she wondered with a sudden insight, do I wait to take my cue from *them*? And then the thought was gone.

"All those places selling souvlaki are doing just fine," she went on calmly. "And a few years ago, nobody had ever heard of it. And let's remember pizza. When I was a kid—and don't even bother looking at me that way, Paul, I'm not going to tell you when that was—only those of us lucky enough to live in Italian neighborhoods knew what the hell pizza was—*la beetz*, that's how I heard it when I was growing up—and now? It's America's *favorite*, Paul. Number One on the hit parade. The first thing anyone thinks of when mom doesn't feel like cooking. We can do it for falafel and pita bread, I know it."

He patted her, but absentmindedly, in an almost obligatory manner. "If anyone can do it, Nattie, you can. I love your campaign ideas. Come to think of it, it was you who had the idea to package all our Near Eastern food mixes, wasn't it? And then display them with the pita in the markets. Like a package."

She smiled at him. "I'm smart, Paul, remember?"

"Hell, yes, I remember. Come on, Nat, you don't have to remind me how smart you are. Don't you think I know you *made* Ali Baba?" He drew back and stared at her thoughtfully. "You've made me a wealthy man, Natalie. Have we made *you* rich?"

"I do very nicely, thank you. Don't worry about it."

He took her hand in his. "But are you happy, Nattie?"

She was instantly angry, just as if someone had lit a match and put it to a waiting fuse. "What the hell *is* this, Paul? A replay from the 1950s or what? The successful career woman couldn't possibly have true *happiness*, isn't that the way it goes? The successful career woman has to

go home at night and cry into her lonely pillow, right? And regret the lost chance to marry a terrific Arabian-American prince and devote her life to making him happy. Right, Paul?"

He threw his hands up. "Help, help, help. Let me talk to Peter. He should have made you a vice-president a long time ago. A lot more money, too." He smiled, slightly. "And now, if you'll excuse me, Natalie darling, I love that tempura. Lemme go see if I can help finish it off."

Once again, she was in the middle of the room, alone. There was usually *somebody* at her elbow. Somebody who was waiting eagerly to be seen, or heard, or read. She walked over to the table and poured herself a glass of wine, trying to catch Jeff's eye. A quickie at the Alden right after work suddenly seemed very appealing. She was having so many troubling thoughts; it wasn't like her. One of the reasons she'd always done so well in advertising was that she wasn't a creature of moods. She was an Up person, always ready with a laugh and a quip, always ready to go out drinking or dancing or to hold a meeting all night long . . . or whatever. She smiled to herself. It was often the *whatevers* that made life interesting . . . that made her able to look at herself in the mirror every day and give herself a smile, knowing she was attractive.

Jeff was off in one of the corners of the kitchen. He had backed Martha J into that corner and was hovering over her, talking and gesticulating with one hand while he drank from the glass he held in the other. Martha, as still as if carved from some exotic wood, leaned into the wall and sipped slowly from the glass that never left her lips, her large liquid eyes gazing unblinking up into his. She did not smile, although her lips quirked from time to time, as though she'd like to and would, if he ever thought of something amusing enough to deserve it. Natalie stared at Martha J's smooth, unlined brown face and felt a lump of panic fly up into her throat. They were both so young . . . As she had been when she first came here and met Jerry and Jake and Peter.

"Penny for your thoughts." The voice came from behind her, startling her completely.

"Millard. No thanks, bubbele. They aren't worth a

plugged nickel today; I wouldn't cheat an old friend like you." She looked at him fondly. Millard had his shticks, but he was a honey. He was a pro, that's what he was. Nothing got in the way of him doing the job he was paid to do. "You ever have days when you felt about three hundred years old, totally useless, and like throwing yourself out of the window?" she asked. And then laughed.

Millard gave her an enigmatic look. "Often, darling, often. But that's the fate, so they say, of an aging gay. Surely not for you: a married lady with a lovely daughter." His voice put just the hint of a question mark after the sentence.

Et tu, she thought, recalling how in the old days he had cried on her shoulder and told her all his problems; but of course that was before he was able to come out of the closet and everything had to be *so* discreet. And now, was he too going to feel fucking *sorry* for her? She was damned if he would!

"Just a rhetorical question, love," she said, smiling in her best reassuring fashion, and was rewarded with a flash of relief in his hooded eyes. Even the head cook, it seemed, needed mommy. Nobody ever wanted mommy to feel blue, show weakness, long for oblivion. Melissa? It occurred to her that she had no idea how Melissa felt about her—other than loving her, of course.

Jeff Lawrence turned and she tried once again to catch his eye. But he was now holding Martha J's hand—she wasn't pulling it away either—and all his attention was on her as he half pulled and half led her across the room, toward the doorway.—Goddammit, Natalie thought; but she could not bring herself to call his name. She was damned if she'd give him that satisfaction.

21 Making It

When she heard the buzzer at 7:30, Natalie had just stepped out of the shower. Dripping and cursing, a towel tucked hastily around her, she ran to the intercom. "Yes?" And when the tinny voice, angry even over the speaker, barked, "Mark Valentine," she was so astonished that she said, "Oh of course, come right up." And then had to run like hell to put something on. A floor-length T-shirt, one of her favorite things actually, was lying across the bed. She slipped it over her head quickly, taking a fast look in the mirror—who cared what she looked like anyway? She looked decent enough—and then shook her wet head, showering drops of water all over the bedroom floor. The doorbell was ringing now, over and over and over. What ailed the man? "Just a minute!" she hollered. "Hold your horses!" She ran down the hall barefoot, muttering to herself. "What a pain, what a pain." She had been looking forward to her evening alone—once she got used to the idea—and *now* what?

Inching the door open just a crack, she put on a bright smile and said, "Hi, Mark! What's the problem? Sorry I can't ask you in, but I'm not dressed . . ."

He pushed past her and slammed the door behind him. She staggered backward, staring at him, unbelieving. "I beg your pardon!" she gasped. "What do you think you're *doing*?"

"Goddammit!" he shouted, rounding on her, "everything was fine until you came along! The house was fine, the kids were fine, dinner was on the table every night—! Oh I know, I know, you think that's male chauvinist and stupid

. . . but let me tell you, lady, that's *civilization*!" His hands were both fisted, clenched tight, and raised pugnaciously in front of him.

Natalie shook her head. "Hey," she said as lightly as she could manage. "I'm just an innocent bystander . . ."

He thrust his jaw forward. "All right, where is she? I know she's here! And why in hell do you have to keep her working so fucking late all the time?"

"Hey! You got the wrong person, Mark. She's not here. She's still at the office."

"No, she's not. I've called and called and nobody answers!"

"Well, the switchboard is off. I don't know where the calls are going tonight, but it won't be in the kitchen. But one thing is for sure: she ain't here."

"I *know* she is . . . !"

"You're wrong. I'm all alone." She spread her arms wide. "Wanna go look?" And instantly regretted her words. He was nearly incoherent, and his voice sounded choked. Two splotches of color stained his cheekbones, and his eyes glittered strangely. She wondered if he might be drunk; but there was no smell of booze about him. In any case, he made her uneasy . . . and like an idiot, here she was inviting him right in to prowl around.

He became instantly quiet. "Yeah, I'm gonna look all right," he grated and she was so numbed that she just gestured him down the hall and watched him stride away.

"When you're finished, I'll be in the living room," she called after him, and went right over to the bar and poured herself a large shot of vodka. "Here's to vitamin V," she murmured and raised the glass to her reflection in the smoked mirror behind the bar. That mirror was Jerry's one contribution to the decoration of the apartment. She hated that damn mirror and, in fact, he didn't like it either and had laughed after they hung it and said, "From now on, leave me out of it."

It wasn't even a good mirror, really. She moved her head from side to side and watched the faint ripples in the glass change the shape of her nose. There was color on her cheekbones, too, she saw. Well, yes, she was a bit agitated.

The crazy loon, bursting in like that without warning. Without even calling first! Oh maybe he *had* called—while she was in the shower. She had taken such a wonderful *long*, hot, steamy pounding-on-the-back shower. He could have called and called and called.

Well, anyway, this wasn't any of her affair. And it was tricky. As she left the taste testing that afternoon, she had heard Peter insisting that Barbara and Millard come to his office that very minute, to talk to that gorgeous guy with the white hair, what's-his-name from Eden's Dream. So, if Peter was pitching an account after hours—and he'd been known to do just that many times—Barbara would be stuck. On the other hand, what if she wasn't in Peter's office, making like an expert? What if she was in the Silver Streak . . . or the Alden? With Jake? Or didn't Jake go there anymore, now that he had a place of his own? Each thought was a dagger in her heart. She took a hefty swig of her drink. She'd have to be very careful about what she said to Mark. Jolly him along, somehow . . . although the very idea of Mark Valentine being made jolly was a laugh and a half.

He reappeared, still breathing fire, just as she was pouring herself a second helping. She met his eyes in the mirror and said in her best hostessy voice, "Can I give you a little vitamin V before you go?"

Belligerently, he growled, "I'm not going anywhere . . . not until you tell me where my wife is!"

"I told you: I don't know where she is!"

"You fucking women! You all lie! You all cover for each other—"

"Hold everything. You can't—"

"I can do whatever I fucking well please, you bitch! You! You're the one . . . putting crazy ideas into her head . . ." He advanced on her, and Natalie shrank back against the bar. Christ almighty, she thought, what will I do if he gets violent? Just look at him; he looks like a maddened bull. Her mind skittered about wildly, casting for some way to calm him down and then get him out of there! What was he going on about? ". . . castrating bitches, all of you! Now she wants me to *cook* . . . *me* to cook! I'm

supposed to get dinner on the table if madame comes home late . . . ! Can you beat it? That's not what a man is for—!" Now he was very close, towering over her. He wasn't a tall man, but he seemed to loom. She kept telling herself she ought to feel threatened, ought to feel frightened. And all she could think was my God, he is gorgeous.

She tipped her head back to look directly into his eyes and, with a laugh, said, "Do you know that you're beautiful when you're angry?" It would have made Jake howl.

Mark Valentine stared at her for a heartbeat. Then, growling deep in his throat, he grabbed her by her arms. She stiffened, thinking he was going to shake her. But instead, he pulled her close and bent his head to kiss her hungrily with an open, avid mouth. His fingers were biting into her flesh, hurting her, as he pushed his tongue deep into her mouth. She felt as if she would choke. She struggled to free herself. In answer, he wrapped his arms completely around her. She could feel the heat from the palms of his hands through the thin cotton of the T-shirt. Now he lifted his mouth from hers, but only to mutter, "Bitch!" and then to bend to her throat with eager, burning lips.

She couldn't help herself. In spite of everything in her that said, stop it, stop him, this isn't right, she could feel that dizzy heat rising like fever through her loins up through her body, into her head. Her head was floating above the rest of her body. She could hardly breathe. He was back at her mouth, demanding, breathing hard, biting at her lips and licking at her teeth. And she . . . she was standing on tiptoe, straining to him, thrusting her hips against the hot bulge between his legs. His hands were on her back, pressing and kneading. Then on her buttocks, pulling her closer. He groaned. He ground his hips into hers while his demanding hands rucked up the nightshirt, pulling it past her thighs, past her hips, up around her waist. Now they were both moaning, and she could feel that she was wet and waiting for him.

Suddenly, with one sure swift move, he stripped the gown from her body, threw it across the room, and was taking in her nakedness with wild, hot eyes. He tore his clothes off while she stood, her back pressed against the warm wood of the bar, heart hammering madly. He was a

wild man, he was unstoppable, and she wanted him. She wanted him the way she had not wanted anyone in years . . . now, this minute, without a word, without a gesture.

When he stood naked before her, displaying his triumphant cock, she could think only, Jesus Christ, he's enormous. And without volition, almost as if drawn by a magnet, she was once again in his arms, that beautiful rod of hardened flesh a promise burning between her thighs.

"Now!" she gasped, her mouth dry with desire. "For God's sake, now!"

He pulled her to the floor, pushing her legs apart with his knee, and pushed into her with a grunt. She felt first a small stab of pain, followed immediately by a rush of pleasure as he pounded at her. There was nothing else in the world for her except the pulsing of her own loins and the heavy weight of his stiff flesh, filling her, withdrawing, filling her again. He smashed against her, hurting her, in and out like a pile driver. She wanted to say something to him, cry out her pleasure in him; but she could not catch her breath. She could barely think. There was nothing, nothing, nothing but the sound of his rasping breath close to her ear and his hard hands pushing at her buttocks. He was crushing her, she was turning to liquid, she was going to melt, she was going to die, explode, he was moving faster and faster and there was a feeling . . . a feeling . . . a feeling, she was almost there and then he gave a groan that she could feel in her belly and he slammed into her, all the muscles throbbing and fluttering and she came with him. They were drenched in each other's sweat, panting, clinging to each other like two drowning souls. She could not have said who she was or where they were.

With his face still buried in her neck, Mark moaned, "Oh Jesus! Oh my God, I don't know . . ." He rolled away a little, but Natalie did nothing to release him. She kept her arms tightly around his waist holding him inside her.

"Don't move anymore," she whispered.

"What do I say, for Christ's sake?" Mark went on. He would not look at her; in fact, his eyes were squeezed shut as if in pain. "It—I—I haven't been carried away like that since I was a teenager . . . Jesus. It was pretty wonderful . . . I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm supposed to be apologizing to

you. But . . . it was, it was!" At last he opened his eyes and looked at her. She almost laughed out loud; he looked *embarrassed* and *sheepish*! What would come from him next? An "Aw shucks, ma'am"?

She waited a moment and then said, "Mmmm?"

"I don't know what to say," he said.

Natalie rubbed one hand along the heavy muscles that ran across his shoulders and smiled. "Well, let's see," she said in a throaty voice. "How about telling me that was one helluva good beginning and now let's really fuck." She felt his quick intake of breath, the surprised stiffening of his entire body, and she chuckled.

There was a moment of silence while he stared at her, and then she felt him growing within her until he once again filled her completely. Wiggling more snugly around him, she chuckled again and said, "Ah . . . so you're not so *terribly* sorry, after all . . . that's nice. That's very nice, in fact. Don't *you* think that's nice?" She reared back a bit to look at him and found a smile quirking at his mouth. Then he did smile, a real smile, a surprisingly sweet smile and she wriggled in even closer to him, rubbing his back and lifting her mouth for a kiss. This time they were gentler with each other. She ran her tongue over his lips, savoring the taste of him, eliciting a groan from deep in his stomach.

She began to move her hips rhythmically but he said softly, "No. Not yet. I have something else in mind." And, gently, gently, he pulled out of her and moved himself down the length of her body, licking her as he went, setting her afire. He spent a long, lovely, lingering time caressing her with his mouth, turning her into a writhing mass of aroused sensation. Only then did he enter her again, bringing her to climax, over and over again.

When the clock in the dining room chimed 9:00, they were still entwined on the floor half asleep. Natalie listened to it, her mind humming with pleasure and fulfillment. And then, all of a sudden, she realized what those lovely little tinkles meant and she broke out of his embrace.

"Oh shit! Did you hear that? Nine o'clock?"

Mark, head pillowed on one arm and eyes closed, muttered something unintelligible.

She poked at his shoulder. "You have to get up . . . you have to get *out* of here! Jerry and Melissa are at Lincoln Center and God only knows what time the damn ballet finishes. They could walk in at any moment . . . oh shit! The door! Did I ever lock it?" And she ran down the hall to the front door. She had not locked it. And she did so now and then, for good measure, put the chain lock on. If Jerry wanted to know how come, she'd think of something. She could say, "Oh, I always do that when I'm alone." Would he know the difference? No. She was never alone. He'd believe whatever she told him. He wasn't tuned into her life at all. He'd never know.

She padded back down the hall, now aware of her nakedness, the chill on her damp back. She came back into the living room, looking around for her nightshirt. He'd thrown it somewhere but who could remember? As she walked in, Mark groaned and pushed himself to his feet.

"Much as I would like you to stay just as you are so I can get a good, long look at that bod—you'd better get dressed." And she stood and watched as he got his clothes and began to pull them on. All his clothes had also been just flung into a pile in the corner and there he was, shaking them out, muttering as he saw the wrinkles, frowning and scowling and carrying on like a fussy hen. It was almost funny: those old-maidish attitudes superimposed on such a magnificent male body. She leaned against the door jamb and studied him as he moved. "When you get to my nightie, would you mind throwing it this way?" she said wryly. "You don't have to smooth it out first; I'll iron it myself."

He turned and gave her a sharp look. "What? Oh. My compulsiveness. Well, yes, I guess I am, a little. Must be my childhood training." He laughed shortly and shook out his shirt, shaking his head. "I haven't thrown my clothes around like that since I was nine."

"Nine? Why is nine the magic number?"

"Boy Scout Camp . . ." He pulled on a pair of startlingly bright purple jockey shorts. "A gift," he explained and then added: "I also learned how to make tight hospital corners . . . at camp, I mean."

"And how to rub two sticks together to start a fire. . . ." Natalie added in a murmur. "Or how to rub two *somethings* . . ."

To her shock, he actually laughed. "You really are a ballbuster, Natalie." He finished dressing and walked over to her, holding out her nightshirt. But when he was standing in front of her, he quickly moved it behind his back, grinning. "You really are a helluva lay, too, lady." He reached out and with one finger, traced a light line down her cheek. "Eighteen years with one woman . . ." he said, almost to himself. "You forget . . . Well, I got reminded tonight, all right." He held out the nightie to her and swiftly ran a hand down the curve of waist and hip before she could put it on. "You're so tiny . . . well, after B—I mean, you're really a small woman."

"I know what you're saying. Don't be embarrassed. Guess what? I know you're married to Barbara."

He laid one palm along her cheek and regarded her solemnly. "I think it's bothering me." Natalie stared at him.

"You don't feel *guilty*! You couldn't!"

He didn't answer, but his eyes slid away from hers uneasily. Natalie stared up at the perfectly modeled face with its chiseled features. Christ, what a beautiful creature he was! Funny how she had forgotten completely . . . didn't even think about it while they were making love. In fact, she couldn't remember clearly ever having looked at him at all while they were making love. Yet now, she couldn't take her eyes off that face. Could a woman ever get used to it? she wondered. It might be fun putting it to a little test of time . . . say a year or so. And then she chided herself. For shame! Barbara's husband! Well, and why the hell not? It used to be Maureen's husband, didn't it? And before that, it was Fran's husband, Jerry Weber, wasn't it? Hell, her specialty was other women's husbands! Still, she was fond of Barbara, Barbara was her friend. Barbara was *real,* for Christ's sake, whereas Maureen was nothing more than a ghostly figure who was rumored to live in East Brunswick, New Jersey. Fran was a boring middle-aged, overweight broad with bleached hair who had shown up at the office Christmas party twice. And on the other hand—

she eyed that perfect face again—this was just too goddam good to let go. "I'll be waiting to hear from you," she murmured.

"Whoa there, lady." He dropped his hand as if he had been burned and looked at her in such a way that she felt impelled to put her nightshirt on, as fast as possible. He stepped back from her a few paces. "I'm a happily married man."

"Oh? That's interesting. And what were you just doing with me?"

He shrugged and smiled, throwing his hand up helplessly. "Hey, I already said it was terrific and it was. But that doesn't mean we can do it again. I figure, you're either happily married or you're not . . . And I figure I am." And without another word, he turned and walked away. She heard the front door close and then the creak of the elevator door. He was gone. It was over.

She surveyed the living room with her eyes. Funny. Except for the rucked-up corner of the rug, where they had lain together, and the two glasses with their melting ice and watered-down vodka, the room was curiously untouched. It was difficult to believe. They had been so frantic, so turbulent . . . she half expected the walls to be exuding the smell of them. She leaned back against the wall and allowed a fragment of memory to wash over her and, involuntarily, her eyes closed and a shudder coursed through her.

If anyone had told her this morning, as she was jogging around the reservoir in the park, that by this evening, she'd be in her own living room, with her heart speeding up at the memory of making it with Mark Valentine, she'd have laughed them right out of the place. He thought it was finished. Well, they'd see. She smiled. She picked up the glasses to bring them to the kitchen when the phone rang; and she suddenly realized that it hadn't rung at all while they . . . or had it? It was entirely possible that she would not have heard anything.

Putting the glasses into the sink for Audrey, she picked up the kitchen extension. "Nat? Nat? It's me, Barbara." Oh Christ, Natalie thought, awash with guilt. What the hell would she be calling for at this hour? What if she asked,

Have you seen Mark? But that was stupid, she wasn't going to ask if Natalie had seen Mark nor anything like it.

"Nat? Are you there?"

"Of course I am." Strange how her throat needed to be cleared suddenly. "What's the problem?"

"I just got home." The silence as she paused was highly dramatic. "*Just* got home," she repeated. "It's nine-thirty. I was supposed to leave work at five."

The penny dropped. "Oh shit! Peter!"

"Oh, Nattie, I don't know what's the matter with him. But something very strange is going on. He just talks and talks and talks and never seems to listen. In the middle of it all, he'll come out with good ideas; but there's an awful lot of just . . . far-out stuff, too . . ." She sounded very agitated.

"Don't worry about it. Peter has always been eccentric," Natalie soothed. "You've heard all of us talk about our Peter Experiences; you know he often keeps somebody or other trapped in his office for hours and hours. It's a power trip for him, that's all. We put up with it because he pays us so handsomely. You know these only children: they hate to be without company. It's just his way of—"

"But, Natalie, this was different. I can't explain, but he . . . scared me. And listen, he scared Millard, too. Millard! He was positively *green* by the time we got away. For one thing, he said we were waiting for the guy from the health foods. But he never showed. Natalie"—her voice dropped to a whisper—"I don't think we ever *had* a date with that health food guy. I think Peter forgot to *ask* him! And darn it, Jake was going to take me for a celebration drink and dinner, and I had to miss it."

Chortling to herself, Natalie said, "Let me see what I can do about Peter. Don't worry about him. I'll talk to Millard in the morning . . ."

"Oh Natalie, it's so comforting to talk to you—oh dear! Mark! You're so late, darling. Sorry Nattie, I'd better hang up. I haven't seen my husband since this morning, and he's just gotten home." There was the sound of her nervous laughter and then a click and then nothing.

22 That Old Familiar Face

Barbara Valentine stared at herself in the mirror and shook her head. She couldn't believe it. After all these years, after so much happiness, she and Mark had just had the fight to end all fights. She was still shaking, inside—she could feel the muscles in her belly quivering with rage and tension and fatigue—and her mascara was smeared all around her eyes from tears. She'd fought off those tears but they *would* come! It wasn't weakness, she told herself, it was fury.

All right, so he didn't like the idea of her going to work, of not being available. Was that any reason not even to *listen* to her? Especially when she was so worried! He'd hardly noticed how late it was . . . he didn't say a word about her coming home so late. Just snapped at her. "Barbara, I'm exhausted and I don't feel like talking about the ad game tonight," he'd said finally. And that had started them off. It had begun with advertising, run through her mother, his mother, all her years as unpaid servant, her reversion to the usual castrating female, his denigration of her as a whole person, and ended up finally with them glaring at each other, panting with exertion and anger. They were right on the verge of saying or doing things they'd never be able to erase. Panic had swept over her. She had done what she'd always done to make up. She'd snuggled up to him, putting her arms behind his neck, and said, "Oh darling, let's go make up in bed." And he pushed

her off! Flung her away! "Oh for Christ's sake, Barbara!" he'd snarled and gone pounding up the stairs, to the spare room. The spare room! She was devastated.

And yet . . . and yet . . . was she, really? Peter Marcus was a bit scary, but it had been very exciting, shut up with him all those hours. Like an exciting adventure into uncharted waters. She stared at her reflection and laughed aloud. She was licking her lips, actually licking her lips like a cat that had got into the cream.

She knew that Jake had been terribly disappointed not to spend the evening with her, and that pleased her somehow. He was crazy about her, she knew that. She lifted her chin, to get rid of the incipient softness under the jaw that threatened all the time to become a double chin. She smiled at herself. She'd still have her drink and dinner celebration. She didn't need Mark for that. She didn't need Mark for a lot of stuff now. He could just stew all by himself up in the spare room; she wasn't going to go up there, oh no!

After her dinner, Barbara marched grimly to the linen closet, taking a chair to stand on. She went to the top shelf in the linen closet and dragged out the box. Her Grammy Taylor's quilt went right onto the bed, and she snuggled under it. Funny, how that had stuck in her craw all these years. Grammy Taylor's Quilt, complete with capital letters.

It had been the first day back from their honeymoon, Mark and Barbara Valentine, glowing and ecstatic, in the first place they could call their own home. It was a little apartment in Cambridge, with a terrible tiny kitchen that had only a hot plate to cook on. But the big main room had 10-foot ceilings and a big bay window and that made it perfect as far as Mark was concerned. Their only furniture was a double bed, an old enamel top table, and two chairs . . . and she had bought two potted plants, geraniums with their brave scarlet blooms, which she put on the window ledge.

They arrived at their new home very late on a Saturday night, and so it was not until after brunch, early the next afternoon, that Barbara finally got around to unpacking

the few treasures she had brought to her marriage. "No, no," she told Mark, pushing him out of the miniscule bedroom, "this is woman's work. I want it to be a surprise." Biting her lower lip with excitement, she unpacked the heavy crates that had arrived from her mother in Milwaukee during the week. There were the table linens, cream and white damask, and there were the heavy brass candlesticks she had always loved, and oh yes, packed very carefully, her new pots and pans, and the nice crisp sheets, yellow-and-white stripes and yellow-and-white checks. And there, on the bottom, so carefully wrapped in layers of newspaper and tissue, was Grammy's quilt. Great-grandma Schwab made it and handed it on to Grammy Taylor, who gave it to her oldest daughter, Barbara's mom, and now it was hers, given to her on her wedding day.

Lovingly, she unfolded the layers of paper and there it was, smelling of sachet and soap, even more beautiful than she remembered. It was the log cabin pattern, line after line of soft, muted, misty much-washed colors. As a little girl, she could spend hours just looking at this quilt, which was on her mother's and father's bed then, rejoicing in the unusual color combinations and the regularity of the repeated pattern. She loved it and had secretly been glad that she, and not any of her sisters, was the firstborn and would get it one day.

And now that day had come. She lifted it out and with loving hands shook it over the bed—their bed, hers and Mark's, where last night they had made such tender, beautiful love—and smoothed it out. The bed was actually only a box spring and mattress, but with the quilt spread out, glowing in the warm September light, it was transformed into a thing of beauty.

"All right, Mark," she called, her voice trembling with anticipation. "You can come in now!"

He walked in yawning, still holding the newspaper in one hand. Then he stopped stock still and said, "Oh my God, what do you call *that*!"

Barbara stared at him, not able to believe what she thought she heard.

"What do you mean?" she finally managed. There was a

chill on the back of her neck, as if the sun had suddenly gone behind a cloud.

"I mean get that . . . that . . . thing off my bed, will you please?" Then he finally turned to look at her and, seeing something in her face, he came over to her and took her in his arms. "Aw, Barbie doll, I don't want to hurt your feelings, but, see . . . I'm the one studying architecture and design . . ."

"I know that," she said tightly, her heart a stone in her chest.

"Yes, but, see, esthetics are so important to me. And, well, I had planned a totally modern look for our home."

"Yes, well, but this quilt is special. I don't think you understand, darling." She pulled back from him a little. Her heart was hammering away like crazy. How she hated any kind of disagreement with him. And they were just married two weeks! "That's my Grammy's quilt, honey. It's a family heirloom. The first—"

"But you see, Barbie doll, heirlooms just don't fit into our scheme."

"This one does," she said stubbornly, now pulling completely out of his embrace.

"No, no. It's okay of its kind, I suppose, but really Barbara, what we need on our bed is something that is aesthetically pleasing and will keep us warm. I planned for a hand-woven natural wool. D/R has one, and I'll get it this week."

"It's my quilt and it's important."

"Oh, sweetheart, don't be unreasonable. We don't want something in our bedroom that's going to make one of us unhappy. And, really, it doesn't go. Trust me. I've been trained to this sort of thing."

"Training has nothing to do with it, Mark. I don't see why I can't have my own quilt on my own bed!"

"Why, Barbie doll, shame on you," he said with a superior smile, "it's not *your* bed, it's *ours*. I can see I have a lot to teach you about form following function . . ." He dropped the newspaper, a familiar glint in his eyes, and reached out for her. Barbara shook her head violently—he wasn't going to make her give up Grammy Taylor's quilt,

he wasn't!—but the moment she felt his hands on her, she turned into a puddle of desire. He was so handsome, her Mark, so smart, so much more than she ever thought she'd get in life. She melted against him as he murmured, "Now I'm going to show you the function your form was meant to follow . . ."

Grammy Taylor's quilt went back into its box that day, never to see the light of day again.

My quilt isn't *ever* going to be hidden away again, Barbara thought, and wondered what magazine she was typical of now. *Ms.*? *Working Woman*? No more the sweet little *Good Housekeeping* wifey, to hell with that! She tossed her head. She was lightheaded from the battle with Mark and the hours cooped up at M & M and holding back the tears. She was ready to drop.

It wasn't until she was nearly asleep that she suddenly remembered that Jennifer had come back from school again today; and she'd never checked on her. She'd never even asked about her. But she was too drowsy to do anything about it now.

23 Peter, Peter, Lotus Eater

The morning dawned crisp, cold, and clear as if painted with shiny acrylic. Natalie decided to walk all the way to work. There was still too much snow in the park to run. A good brisk walk—and plenty of time to think about last night's adventure with Mark Valentine. As she strode along Fifth Avenue, she smiled to herself. That was the best sex she had ever had. Why? she wondered. Because for once in her life, she didn't have to be aggressive? Her loins still tingled whenever she thought about it . . . and she had thought about it over and over. Like some dumb teenager with a crush. At breakfast this morning, Melissa had even remarked, "How come you're so happy all of a sudden?" Still, she smiled and lengthened her stride, reveling in the pull of her own strong muscles. Fuck you, Jake . . . and Jeff . . . and Jerry, for that matter. All of you. There's life in the old dame yet. As she walked by the promenade in Rockefeller Plaza, she noticed they had already put up the angels, to line the sidewalk to the skating rink. And the tree was up. There it was, with its giant ornaments glistening and winking in the weak sunshine. Christmas . . . Next week, come to think of it. Where had she been? Everything was just passing by without her noticing it. Good thing Jerry loved buying presents; she certainly hadn't thought of it. The price you had to pay for being busy at work. Ah, but everything was terrific,

and she was not at all surprised that men she passed turned to give her a second look. She felt as if she were shooting off sparks.

Harve in the downstairs lobby gave her a big hello and said, "Lookin' swell this morning, Ms. Simon," and she gave him a grin. It showed, she knew it showed! She found herself humming a tune she couldn't place and, wondering idly what it was, she stepped out of the elevator and stopped, totally surprised to see a strange man, neatly dressed, leather attaché case balanced on his knees, sitting perfectly still in one of the chairs.

"We're not open yet," she said. "Can I help you?"

The man, clean-shaven and blank-eyed, looked at her without interest. "I have—*had* an eight o'clock appointment with . . . ah . . . Mr. Marcus. Peter Marcus."

She glanced at her watch. Eight-twenty. "An eight o'clock appointment? With Peter Marcus? Are you sure? I know Mr. Marcus quite well and early-morning appointments are not his usual style." She tried a smile. It did nothing.

"I'm Mr. Withers of the IRS. Mr. Marcus requested eight o'clock in the morning. I caught an early train particularly for this meeting."

The IRS! "Does Mr. Marcus have a problem with you people?"

"I'm not at liberty to say, ma'am."

Oh Jesus. Her mind was spinning around and around. All that erratic behavior lately . . . was it all just a coverup for some hanky-panky of his? And was it all coming home to roost now? She smiled again, automatically. "I'll go check his office. You wait here and I'll be back."

Quickly she rapped down the hall, slowing only to throw her briefcase and coat into her open office door. She aimed for the couch, but the case went skidding across the floor. To hell with it. Peter—at 8:00 in the *morning*? She just couldn't believe it. Either the IRS man was a compulsive nut or he was mistaken. Or—the thought was like a cold, clammy fist in her gut—Peter was in trouble. Why else a meeting an hour before anyone would be around?

She was almost positive Peter's door would be closed

and locked—he always locked it, unlike all the rest of them—so that when she turned the knob and the door opened, she nearly fell in. "Ohmygod?" she breathed. Peter Marcus was in, all right; but he was in no shape to meet anyone—particularly not the tax man. He lay curled up on the rug, like a puppy, his eyes closed, so still that for a horrified moment Natalie was not sure he was breathing. At last she spotted a faint movement in his chest and only then was she able to go to him and feel for the heartbeat. It was there, very rapid she thought, but there. He looked peaceful enough, but his face was slick with sweat and the salt-and-pepper hair was matted to his head.

His tongue came out and laboriously licked at his lips. Then he spoke, in a voice that fairly creaked with disuse. "Who is it?"

"Peter, Peter, for heaven's sake, are you all right?"

"Awri' . . ." He groaned and weakly tried to shift position, but only his head would move.

"Peter! Are you sick? What's the matter? What are you doing here? Do you know it's eight-thirty in the morning?"

"Yeah . . . yeah . . . Nat . . . help . . . ge' up."

She put an arm behind his shoulders. He struggled up but he felt flaccid, without any control over his own muscles. "Peter, you've got to help me. We've got to get you into a chair. Are you listening?"

"Yeah . . . minute."

He gestured weakly at her; she understood. He wanted to get up and try to walk. "Wait." She ran to his private bathroom and wet a cloth, bringing it back to wipe his face. "Better?" He groaned. Together, they struggled to get him to his feet. For such a slender man, he was amazingly heavy. But he was floppy and off balance. She actually half carried, half dragged him across the carpeting to the nearest chair.

"Drink," he mumbled.

She crossed to his bar and poured them each a large vodka. She hadn't taken her vitamin V at home, but now she grimly told herself, she needed it. And so by the looks of him did Peter. He sat slumped in the chair, his head bowed, his legs stretched out in front of him. He looked like a rag doll thrown down by an impatient child.

She wasn't at all sure he could hold the heavy crystal, but as soon as she pressed the glass to his hand, his eyes flew open and he grasped it with both hands, bringing it to his lips eagerly, sipping at it.

"Nat . . . drawer . . . second drawer . . ."

"The second drawer of your desk?" He nodded. "Get you something?" He nodded again.

She took a quick gulp from her own glass and put it down. The fiery liquid coursed quickly down to her stomach, easing the fluttering feeling. She didn't like the look of Peter, not at all. And there was that . . . that person, still sitting out there in reception, waiting.

Stepping up to his desk, she glanced again at him. He was looking better, she thought. He must have been dead drunk . . . and yet, she'd never thought he was a heavy drinker particularly . . . She might have to go out there and put the IRS man off for another time. Were they willing to be put off, though? She'd heard so many stories, all of them of the horror variety, about these tax guys. Implacable, mean, killers, sticklers for all the rules. Better or not, Peter Marcus was in no shape to deal with someone like that. She opened the second desk drawer and then stared. It was filled, completely filled, with a rainbow assortment of shiny capsules. "Jesus Christ, Peter!"

He gave her a weak smile. "A red, Nattie. Bring me a l'il red devil . . ."

"Peter! What *is* this? You can't mean—!"

"Don' argue. Please. Gimme a red. Then I'll be fine."

She stood there, looking from his pasty face to the open and overflowing drawer. There must be, she thought in a stunned way, a thousand different pills in there. A thousand? A million! Did he take them *all*? No, no, it couldn't be! The mind boggled! "Peter, for Christ's sake, what are they *for*?"

He made a small sound that might have been a snicker. "My treasure trove. My candy. My feel-goods. Gimme. C'mon, Nat."

"How the hell do you expect me to tell which one is a red monster, or whatever?"

"Devil . . . red devil. Red damn it. C'mon. Jus' bring some an' I'll pick." He looked at her like a small child

begging for a treat, this gaunt grown man with the gray stubble on his chin, flecks of dried saliva at the corners of his mouth, his eyes bloodshot, the lids heavy, his speech slurred . . . sitting and begging for his fix. It was disgusting.

"No, Peter," she said. "I'm not bringing you a red devil or a blue one or a green or anything . . . I'll tell you exactly what I'm going to do. Are you capable of listening?"

"Nattie. Please. I'm telling you . . . I'll be fine."

"No, goddam it, then you'll be drugged. Listen, Peter, listen carefully. There's an IRS man out there in reception . . ."

"Oh Jesus!"

"That's right, oh Jesus. He looks mighty grim, Peter. It seems you made an eight o'clock appointment . . ."

"Oh Jesus!"

"You did, I see."

"Nattie, Nattie, you gotta get rid of him . . . I can't see him . . . now . . ."

She eyed him coldly. "I really ought to let him right in, Peter. Teach you a lesson."

"Oh, Nattie, please, no. Please, Nattie, get rid of him. Get rid of him for me . . ." Weak tears filled his eyes.

Natalie turned away. She couldn't bear to look at him. Delicious, eccentric, brilliant Peter, turned into a slobbering fool! It was too much! She couldn't really let anyone see the head of M & M in this condition. Nor could she throw Peter to the wolves just like that, no matter how disgusting this whole scene was.

"Okay, Peter. I'll go get rid of him. For now. You know the IRS. He'll be back. And when *I* come back, dear boy, perhaps you'll tell me what's going on."

"I promise."

Tapping briskly back to reception, she wondered how good any promises from him would be right now. Just entering the room, she paused and took a deep breath, pasting a great big social smile on her face. The elevator was already disgorging early arrivals. And there was the blessed Debbie. Natalie motioned her secretary over, putting a finger to her lips to signal silence. She whispered, "Debbie, go into the kitchen—just do as I say, it's an

emergency—go into the kitchen and put on a big pot of coffee. Then order the usual breakfast stuff from Marge-and-Lew's." Wonderful Debbie. She opened her eyes wide but then nodded and went off without a word to do as she was bid. When I'm a VP, Nat thought with satisfaction, I'm going to give that little girl a great big raise.

And then she marched in to deal with the IRS agent, who looked as if he hadn't moved a muscle since she left. Yet she felt as if she'd been gone for a year and a half—at hard labor.

"Oh I'm so sorry, I've looked absolutely everywhere and I don't know what could have happened, but he's simply nowhere to be found . . ." She burbled on and on, watching his face for some sign of life, some change of expression, some response. "Anyway, he can't see you because he's not around and I'm sorry you took an early train," she finished lamely. And then stood and looked at him. The ball, she thought, is now in your fucking court, sweetheart.

He stood up and handed her a card. "Please have Mr. Marcus call me as soon as he comes in. I'll be waiting." And he turned on his heel. Natalie held the card, feeling numb, wondering if "I'll be waiting" was as much of a threat as it sounded. More than ever, she was determined to find out what shit Peter had been pulling. Because the IRS didn't show up for nothing.

She scribbled a note for Gloria, saying that Mr. Marcus was not to be bothered all morning by anyone for any reason whatsoever, underlined everything at least twice, and left it conspicuously on the desk. Then she squared her shoulders again and headed back. On her way by her own office, she yelled in to Debbie, who was of course applying polish to her nails: "I'm with Peter Marcus, Deb. Top-secret meeting. Give everyone breakfast and my love. I'll be back later. Do not disturb, okay?"

Debbie glanced up without pausing in her application. "Okay. *Top* secret? Even from Mr. M?"

"*Especially* from Mr. M. And bless you, my dear Debbie!"

Debbie colored with pleasure. "The coffee will be perked in five minutes. What—?"

"Don't think about it anymore. I'll take care of it."

She let herself back into Peter's office, moving swiftly, closing and locking the door behind her and then leaning up against it, as if to ward off unwanted visitors.

"Oh for Christ's sake!" She stared, unbelieving. Peter was not flopped into the side chair, as she had left him, not at all. He was, amazingly, in his usual place, enthroned behind his desk. Gone was the pallor, the shine of old sweat. He grinned like a monkey, swiveling the chair back and forth. "Nattie!" he laughed. "Don't stand there . . . come on in . . ."

"Peter." She sighed, exasperated.

"I told you, all I needed was a little red devil and I'd be good as gold . . ." He giggled.

"Peter, Peter, what am I going to do with you?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine as wine."

The man was a lunatic. He was totally out of his mind. She just couldn't believe it. Hands on hips, she faced him and grated out: "You damn fool! Ten minutes ago, groveling and sniveling, tears streaming out of your eyes. And now, high on some damn pill thinking you're king shit! Your father must be turning in his grave! And after I went and lied like anything to that government agent! Just to cover for you! Goddam it, Peter, I've a good mind to open this door and let everyone in the agency *see* what's going on with the high and mighty Peter Jay Marcus! How about it, Peter? You ready to share your little secret with all your underlings? Ready to deal with the IRS, are you?"

"Nattie, please, don't leave me alone. You gotta help me. Nattie, listen . . ." He was talking very very fast, rocking back and forth in an agitated manner. "Listen, listen. You gotta help me. I've been a very naughty boy. . . ." He laughed. "I kept some money I was supposed to give to Uncle Sam and now he wants it and guess what? I don't have it anymore. I *spent* it. And anyway, he didn't deserve it. *We* worked for it, didn't we?"

"Oh shit," Natalie sighed. "You've been diddling the books."

" 'Sright. That's exactly what I've been doing. That's a funny word, Nat . . . diddle. As in Hey diddle diddle . . . hey diddle . . ."

"Do hush, Peter. Oh God, I wish you were sober."

"I'm fine. I told you I'm fine. It's just the money. I only need a month or so and I can put it all back. I mean, we're going to get Eden's Dream. Pierce told me already. Too bad about Nature boy . . . but Eden's Dream is better . . . but now, we gotta brainstorm this one . . . and you're my Queen of the Brainstorm, Nattie. You'll tell me how to hold off the IRS until I can put the money back." And he sat, swiveling his chair, looking at her with absolute certainty that she'd fix it.

She was only half listening to him, which she felt was fair as he was only making half sense. Later, she'd find out exactly how he'd stolen the money . . . and how much. A bank loan, arranged in the right way, could possibly take care of the whole problem; she'd have to see how bad this all was. She stared at him: handsome, smiling, addicted and addled, up there on his pedestal . . . and helpless as a baby right now. If she walked out of the room and left him to sink or swim, he'd surely sink. And so would they all. M & M could go right down the tubes—all because Peter Marcus was an only child, a weakling, and a spoiled brat. Well, over her dead body! She hadn't worked this hard, this long, to find herself out on the street looking for a job—not at her age!

"Okay Peter, I'll help you. I'll help you so that nobody else will ever know about the money."

"Really, Nattie? How?"

"Never mind how. Let me worry about that." She eyed him. If ever he was going to challenge her control, now was the time. But he just smiled. If you looked closely you could discern that the smile was slaphappy and unfocused. If you listened, you could hear the manic tone underlying everything he said—even when it made sense.

"But if I'm going to help . . ."

"Yes? And can I have another drink, please?"

She walked over, taking the proffered glass, and poured some vodka into it, handing it back. She shouldn't be doing this. She shouldn't be feeding him booze. She should be packing him off to some exclusive, discreet clinic in Connecticut. She should be calling in Jake, she should be dumping all these pills in the toilet. She should be calling

his doctor. She should go out into the hallway and yell for help.

But she knew she wasn't going to do any of those things, because right now she held her future in her own two hands. After months of having things slipping through her fingers, her marriage, her Jake, her daughter, her youth . . . well, this little butterfly she was going to pin right down, right here, right now.

"If I'm going to help you, Peter, there will be a small fee."

"Fee away, my darling Nattie." He swigged happily at his drink. Natalie found her own glass and took a sip. "You've been promising to make me a VP for two years now."

"Well, I'm going to, I'm going to!"

"No, no, Peter. Too late."

"What do you mean—too late!"

"Now it will cost you a bit more, Peter dear."

"Okay. Okay. What do you want?"

"Creative Director. Double my present salary."

"Double! Impossible!"

She almost laughed aloud. He could hardly think in a straight line. By becoming creative director, she was taking his job; and he didn't even notice. But start talking money and all of a sudden he was tuned in totally. "Okay then, sweetie pie," she said lightly, "a piece of the action."

"Well . . . okay. So that's settled . . . I think I need just a teensy bit more . . ." He sloshed the drink around in his glass.

Natalie shook her head. "Unh-unh, Peter darling. I have a pot of lovely black coffee in the kitchen, which I will go get, and while I'm gone you will be signing an agreement that I am about to type this very moment."

She marched herself over to his gorgeous, brand-new, untouched white electric typewriter, inserted a piece of paper from the top of his desk, and typed rapidly. "Now sign," she said when it was finished, putting it with a flourish in front of him.

"Can I read it first?"

"Of course. I want this all to be perfectly legal and

aboveboard. If you want, let's call in the lawyer. I mean, all it says is that, as of January first, Natalie Simon is VP and Creative Director of M & M, with a twenty percent share of the profits. A simple document, really. And while you're looking it over, I'll go get us that coffee. We don't want to stink of vodka so early in the day, do we, darling?"

"And this—" Peter made a vague gesture at the open drawer with its colorful assortment. "You'll never tell anyone?"

Natalie raised her right hand. "I swear. Never." Quickly, she let herself out of his office, closing the door firmly behind her. Mary-Claire, by this time, was sitting at her desk in the outer office and glanced quizzically at her. "Himself has a terrible hangover," Natalie said in a conspiratorial tone. "I'm going to get him some coffee. Don't let anyone else in, okay? And I think you'd best give me his appointments for this morning." Her tone said, Let's keep this a secret just between us morally superior girls. Mary-Claire purred like a kitten that's been stroked in just the right way. How she longed to be "in," the way Debbie seemed to be. Pulling her into the afterwork sessions might be the price they'd all have to pay for her cooperation.

Striding down the hall, there was a feeling as of bubbles, light and airy, rising in her chest; and she had to work hard not to giggle. VP and Creative Director! "Natalie Simon," it would say in the announcement in the *Times*, "age 41, has become the third-youngest Creative Director in the history of . . ." Or, "Natalie Simon," it would say, "wonder woman of Mad Avenue, has just been promoted to Creative Director and VP of Marcus & Morrisey, the fifty-million-dollar darling of food accounts . . ." Or . . . she would have to have a picture taken, a new one. Should she move her office? No, she liked where she was. Let them all learn that where she was was the beginning of Executive Row.

She wanted to skip, to jump, to grab somebody and say, Guess what just happened to me? Jake. But how could she? How could she tell him with joy that she had just become his boss by fair means or foul. No, that wasn't right. You couldn't think foul when you were dealing with Peter Mar-

cus, who never, ever went by any of the usual rules. Firing her regularly once a month! The stupid shit! Giving her an ulcer, making her grovel, jerking her around.

She'd show Peter Marcus. She'd be so good, so kind, so thoughtful, so wonderful, so unfailingly courteous to him . . . the poor nit wouldn't know what hit him. Nobody could accuse her of doing him dirty. She'd take good care of him. She'd get some big strong guy to be with him. And as soon as she felt in control of his business and his money mess, she'd deal with his drug problem. In the meantime, she'd keep an eye on him at all times, make sure he didn't embarrass the agency, or hurt himself, or OD on pills, or pass out in public. It wasn't going to be easy; he could be incredibly wily. But, hell, she was saving the agency, saving everyone's job—including Peter Marcus's. Hell, she wasn't doing anything terrible. She was a fucking saint!

Before she got to the kitchen, she heard a voice calling her: "Natalie! Natalie! Wait up a minute!" A breathless Martha J, resplendent in a white knit dress shot with gold threads, hurried up to her. How she could move so gracefully on five-inch heels, Natalie would never know! She seemed to float. Natalie looked at the approaching woman with pleasure. Martha J was so smart. She was the first copywriter Natalie had hired after she came back. She'd taken quite a chance with the super cool, nearly smartass black kid who walked in four years ago when she first took over the food group. The way Martha J looked then and the way she came on would have terrified most of the group heads at M & M. Marian Rutledge would have shrieked and run and in fact still wasn't quite sure how to talk to Martha J. But the eyes were level; Natalie remembered vividly how she had looked into those dramatically kohl-lined eyes and had seen intelligence and wit. How right she had been to follow her hunch. Martha J Jones was one of the hottest numbers in the business. She didn't know it yet, but she was about to get her just reward.

"We got worried. You weren't anywhere to be found," said Martha J. "And I have something to tell you. I'm so excited, I just can't wait! Natalie, I'm getting *married*!"

"No you're not. You're going to be head of the food

group!" To Martha J's dumbfounded expression, she quickly added: "I'm being kicked upstairs. Creative Director."

A big, broad white grin spread over Martha J's face. "Head of all Creation! That *is* wonderful. And say *what* is goin' to happen to li'l ole me? Just run it by me again, nice and slow, so I can savor it."

"I'm making you head of the food group."

"Oh, I can't believe it . . . and that means I'm going to be Jeff-er-ee's bosslady, doesn't it? Oh, boy!" They looked at each other and chortled.

Then Martha J assumed a very serious expression. "Natalie," she said, "I'm going to make a small speech. Oh yes I am, so don't try to stop me. You took a big chance, hiring me. I know it. I know how I came on and you saw right through it. So first of all, I owe you a lot for that. And now, you're giving me the step up that'll make all the difference in my career. I just can't ever repay you . . ."

Natalie felt herself blush with pleasure and embarrassment. "No no, Martha J. You *deserve* it. I'm not doing you any favors . . . making you token black group head or anything like that."

"I know that. You're absolutely straight, and that's what I admire so much about you. Listen, Natalie, and I never thought I'd say it out loud about a white woman, but you have been a big role model for me. You're honest. You're fair. You never pull any of that female crap on the men. You're never devious. You don't play games, and you don't use people . . ."

Through Natalie's head flashed a quick series of pictures, glimpses of herself: putting the pressure on Jake . . . giving the orders to Jeff . . . turning on the womanly charm for Barbara and then at the first opportunity, screwing her husband . . . flattering Tommy Thoms, and pinching the sagging cheeks of Papa Hasahni . . . gazing wide-eyed all those years ago at poor Jerry . . . and last but hardly least, promising Peter Marcus that she'd take care of him all right: good, straight, undevious, honest, adorable Nat Simon, oh yeah, the Saint of Madison Avenue.

With a wave of her hand, she cut off whatever else

Martha J had been going to say. "Enough!" she said, trying for a laugh. "Enough!" And she turned abruptly on her heels. A few steps away, she turned back. "You want some advice?"

"Sure."

"Don't get married quite yet . . . not till you've taken a drink of the waters of power."

24 Nat and Jerry

The apartment was empty. At first this surprised Natalie, and then she remembered that tonight Melissa had asked to have dinner with her friend Amy and wouldn't be back until after 8:30. Jerry? Who knew where he was? Dinner was, as usual, in the oven, waiting only to be heated; and her bottle of vitamin V was, as usual, sitting in the refrigerator between the OJ and the dill pickles, frosty and delicious. She poured herself a good shot in the bottom of a thick old-fashioned glass. She picked up the glass in one hand and the bottle in the other. And then she strolled into the living room, put herself into the Eames chair, kicked off her shoes, put up her feet on the footstool and gazed out of the window at the black velvet night pierced by the warm squares of light from the windows opposite and crowned with the diamond points of sparkle that outlined the George Washington Bridge. It was very pleasant here in the quiet, for just a few minutes anyway. She gulped thirstily at the icy drink, letting it relax her. She let out a loud sigh and felt some of the muscles in the back of her neck unkink. It had been a long, long day. But now, drink in hand and bottle by her side, she was ready to unwind.

Peter. He had taken the whole morning, because every time she thought she had a tame president, he would balk or fuss or argue or have a brilliant idea of why he shouldn't do as she wanted. And in the meantime, God only knew how many of those Technicolor wonders he had thrown into his skinny body while she was out getting the coffee. Finally, she realized it: he wasn't going to be any

good to anybody the rest of *this* day. So she gave in to the inevitable and sent him away. It was so simple as to be genius. She called in Jeff Lawrence and in her grimmest voice, so he would catch on that this was strictly business, told him that his job for the rest of the day was to forget eggs and din-dins and baby-sit the boss. And sent the two of them by cab to the New York Tennis Club, where Peter had a membership, to sweat it out. "Remember now, Jeffrey, don't let him out of your sight. He's got some crazy notion in his head that he's got to work today; but he overpartied it last night and he really needs to get put straight." Jeff laughed and laughed and said, "And I thought this kind of thing was behind me when I left the fraternity house." He went off, Peter in tow, happy as a clam, thinking it a wonderful holiday no doubt. As well he might, because the last thing she heard Peter saying was, "And then we'll go to the Four Seasons for dinner."

She took another gulp of the vodka and wondered if she wished she were at the Four Seasons right now. The answer came immediately: no, not if it meant dealing with Peter Marcus coming down off a high. No, she'd have plenty of *that* to do in the weeks to come.

And then there was lunch. She'd canceled her own day and had taken on Peter's. The memory of lunch made her smile with satisfaction. Lunch was with Eden's Dream, and that meant the comeuppance of handsome Adam Pierce, who turned out to be just another tight-ass, too good-looking for his own good and altogether too accustomed to having women fawn all over him. This time she didn't twinkle at Adam Pierce, she didn't come on to him, and she didn't turn on the charm. This time, she was Creative Director and VP Natalie Simon, 100 percent business, 100 percent brains, and 100 percent in charge. By the end of their meeting, he was treating her just as if she were another man—just exactly what she wanted. Of course, it would have been nice if, besides his grudging respect, she had also received an invitation to dinner; but what the hell, you couldn't have *everything*. She drank to Adam Pierce and all his ilk, might they rot in hell. Who needed any of them? She was about to get what everyone wanted: power.

Power: that was the name of the game. She drank to power and splashed some more vodka into the now empty glass. Ice. She needed ice. It was a bit difficult to push herself out of the chair, she was so exhausted. And it was good, after getting the ice, to sit down again and relax.

She wondered how Jeff was doing with Peter, and how Jeff would react to Martha's promotion. How would Martha J's combat-ready boyfriend deal with her promotion? Come to that, how would Jerry deal with *her*, now that she would be earning more than he did? Much more, in fact. She didn't care. She didn't think Jerry would care. One of the few nice things about being married to him was that he didn't care about much. If it made him a lousy lover, it did have the advantage of letting her do pretty much as she pleased without hassle. Poor old Jerry . . . in another world. Sometimes it made her chuckle, how easy it was to fool him. He and Melissa had come in last night, not even half an hour after she'd been fucking Mark Valentine on the living-room floor . . . yet they all could have posed for a picture of the happy family: kissing and talking and smiling at each other.

And Barbara had called her but had got right off the phone when she heard hubby's footsteps. Had Barbara any way of knowing he had been coming to her straight from another woman? And that she had been, in fact, speaking at that moment to that other woman? "Oh, what a tangled web we weave" . . . She drank to Barbara. She was really fond of Barbara . . . maybe she'd do Barbara a favor and leave her husband alone.

This morning, after she had given the good news to Martha J, she had felt suddenly so in need of coffee. She had run right down to the kitchen, leaning against the doorjamb, à la Jake, hand held limply to forehead until Barbara, busy at her desk, sensed another presence and looked up. Her instant, welcoming warm smile of genuine affection gave Natalie a tiny twinge of guilt. Looking at Barbara's fresh, pink-cheeked face, the fair hair piled on top of her head, she thought, oh please, not your sweetness and light, not today, I can't take it.

It was almost too much, having Barbara's innocent ad-

miration served up to her right along with the big mug of steaming coffee she brought. I have, within the past 24 hours, been the shit of the Western world, Natalie thought, smiling at Barbara. Yet, the more I fuck everyone over, the more I seem to be loved and admired. There's Peter, in his office all smiling and peaceful, waiting for me to ply him with coffee and sympathy when I've just taken him for a fifth of the business. My husband sits at his typewriter at home, happy in his marriage, unaware that I've just cuckolded him for the millionth time and don't give any more of a damn this time than I did the first time.

And now, Barbara, whom I really like, I really do . . . She's a smart lady, a quick study, and I can really talk to her. And she's gushing at me because I had Debbie put up the coffee and she thinks I've been so thoughtful. You think I did something nice for you, Barbara? Let me tell you, Barbara, exactly what I did for you. I screwed your husband 20 different ways from Sunday, how do you like that? . . . And even as I talk to you and smile at you now, I'm wondering how soon I can get my hands on him again. And how do you like *that*?

Now she lifted her glass and again drank to Barbara Valentine. I'm sorry, Barbara. But on the other hand, you took my Jake. But not really, it's all his idea, the rotten bastard. Natalie's eyes filled with tears. That no-good. She found herself leaking tears constantly over that lanky clown. She couldn't believe it. Years and years of being in like; she had thought that when it ended, everything would be just fine. But in truth, she had thought it would never end, that was the trouble. She drank to Jake. I'm drinking too much tonight, she thought. But she deserved it. It had been one helluva day. Every muscle in her back was shrieking with tension . . . tomorrow she'd run an extra lap and loosen them all up.

She leaned back in the chair, allowing herself to sink into the soft leather, and closed her eyes. The world began to spin so that she had to open them again, and had to concentrate on staring out at the lights on the bridge, blinking to keep them from blurring.

She heard Melissa's voice even as the key was being

turned in the lock and was surprised by a wave of love for her child that washed over her, leaving her a little breathless. "Missy!" she called. Just as Melissa came running through the living room, she got to her feet, stumbling a little. Just a teeny bit too much to drink, she thought, and gave Melissa a big hug. "Did you have fun? Is it after eight already? Was it a wonderful dinner, baby?" Over the top of Melissa's head, she was startled to see Jerry's bulk in the doorway. Were they together? No, that's right, she had come home not knowing where he was. Then why were they coming back together?

"Daddy got me," Melissa was saying, pulling back from her. "Oooh, Mommy, you smell like booze . . . yuck!"

"Well, I had a little drink or two . . . it was a rough day."

"And you always need your vitamin V!" Melissa laughed at her own joke.

"Come on, Missy! I had a little drink, that's all!"

"It was just a joke, Mommy. Gee whiz. *You* say it."

"Well, that's me. I'm the adult and you're the child."

"Now, sweetheart, let's not get excited. Melissa, don't you have homework to do?" Jerry's mild voice irritated her. Who the hell did he think he was placating anyway? She was fine.

"Melissa knows I'm just joking . . . even if you don't."

"Sure, sweetheart, I know that. Missy. Get to your room now. Bedtime in less than an hour."

"Oh, Daddy, I'll never finish."

"Yes, you will. I'll come and help. In a minute."

"Oh, I get it. You and Mommy want to have a fight, and you don't want me to hear."

"Melissa!" Natalie protested. She glanced at Jerry but got no responsive smile. He looked very serious; for Jerry, he looked positively grim. She let the joke on her lips die unspoken and said, "Do as you're told, honey."

She held herself very straight and still until the little girl had disappeared down the hall. Then she flopped back into the chair. She was quite dizzy. "So, Jerry," she said, reaching for her glass, "are we going to have a fight? If so, I'll freshen up my drink first."

Striding across the room with amazing speed—Jerry never moved faster than a stroll—he grabbed the glass from her hand. She could only stare, open-mouthed, at him, as he gritted, "Give me that! You don't need any *more*, God knows! You're drunk, Natalie, you're stinking . . . and the pity of it is, you don't even know it!"

"You're crazy! Give me back that glass!"

"Not on your life. Face it, Natalie, you're a goddam lush! Your own child just told you you stink of it!"

"So I had a couple! I also had the worst day of my entire life! Peter—"

"I don't want to hear about Peter Marcus! I'm sick to death of you hiding behind your job!"

"Hiding behind my job! Well, it might interest you to know that, as of the first of the year, I'll be hiding behind a different job . . ."

"What are you talking about! What different job?"

"Aha! So you're not so disinterested. I'm going to be VP—"

"That again! That's old news."

She grinned at him, wishing she had that drink. She felt parched. "Wait. I haven't finished. *And* Creative Director."

"Creative Director! That's a laugh. Peter Marcus thinks he's the creative genius of M & M. He'll never give it up!"

She laughed. "That's what you think, my dear Jerry. Your lush of a wife has it all signed, sealed, delivered, and in her handbag." She laughed again, enjoying immensely the look of stupefaction on his soft face. "Wanna see it?"

"In fact—yes."

"Okay. I'll get it . . . and I'll get myself another drink, too." Who was he to tell her when she'd had enough? She wasn't his child. He wasn't in charge of her decisions. She started to push herself out of the chair, but she kept losing her balance somehow. Damn chair!

"You see what I mean?" Jerry said, a smug, pleased little smile on his face.

Damn him! So fucking superior. She took a deep breath

and concentrated. This time she stood up, stumbling only the tiniest bit. She knew she'd had a little too much tonight but Christ, what a day. He couldn't imagine it. He'd gotten out of that rat race as quickly as he could. He shut himself in all day long, away from the whole world. What did he know?

She wouldn't even give him the satisfaction of looking at him. She walked very carefully to where she'd dropped her bag, near the bar, and very carefully bent over to get it. She waved the paper at him, forcing him to come after it. And while he glanced at it, she poured herself a fresh drink, throwing in a lot of ice. It was time to slow down; she didn't want to be blotto.

Jerry read it over two or three times. Then he sighed, looked up at her and inquired, in a voice as mild as milk. "Twenty percent. How many times did you have to fuck him to get *this*?"

She could only stare at him. Her heart began to pound violently. "What a stinking thing to say! You know damn well I wouldn't ever screw Peter! Jesus!"

"Oh. You wouldn't? Sorry. Then he must be the only one at M & M."

"Jerry! !" She grabbed onto the bar for support. His words were like physical blows.

"Well? It's true, isn't it? Sure it is." He gave her a slow, cynical smile. "You thought I didn't know. You thought you were so clever and discreet. How naive of you. I've always known."

"Known *what*? What gossip have you been listening to?"

"Jake, for instance. Yes, Natalie. Jake. I've always known about Jake. Ah, you look surprised. You thought your poor old Jerry was blind, deaf, and dumb. Come on, Natalie. And I know how you celebrated your birthday . . . a little private party in your office with what's-his-name, the kid from Princeton. Hey, sweetheart, I was there, remember? But don't worry, I don't think too many people noticed besides me . . . and Millard."

Oh Christ! She felt sick. She felt as if she had stepped with one foot over the edge of the precipice. The pulse in

her throat beat so heavily she was sure Jerry could see it, see her panic. What was he going to do? *What was he going to do?*

Jerry looked her over quite calmly. He was maddening. Even now, confronting her like this, he was incapable of any deep emotion. If she came out of this in one piece, she'd kill him. "You'd better sit down, Natalie, I don't want you fainting."

"I'm not fainting, don't worry."

"You should see yourself. You're positively gray. I think you'd really better sit down. You've had a shock, I know. And I have a few things more to say to you."

Natalie made sure she had her drink with her. If ever she needed one, she needed it now. She didn't give a damn what he said about her being a drunk, she needed it. What was he going to do? This was a Jerry she had never seen before; she had no idea what to expect from him and it gave her a sinking feeling. Nausea welled up in her throat. She sat herself on the edge of the couch, holding herself very erect.

Jerry took her place in the chair and swiveled it to face her. "Now then," he said. "I want you to know that your infidelities don't really bother me; I'm used to it by this time. But your drinking is another matter. Because you bring it home with you, and you impose it upon Melissa." Even as she fought down her panic, Natalie noted that he was using his best professorial tone, the one she found so annoying. Damn the man, was he totally incapable of any human response? "I find it reprehensible," Jerry went on, "that Melissa makes jokes about your vitamin V in the orange juice. A child of her age shouldn't be talking about her mother's alcohol consumption." He paused, placing one hammy hand on each heavy thigh, regarding her with steady gaze. "Well?"

"Well—what? What do you want from me? Not sex, like a normal man . . . that we both know. So, *what*, Jerry?"

"Oh come on, Natalie. You think your constant sleeping around has been a big turn-on?"

"Oh come on yourself, Jerry. Why do you think I had to go looking elsewhere? Or did you really think that once a

month for three and a half minutes constituted a decent sex life?"

"Don't start that again. You're just trying to change the subject. We're talking about your drinking problem . . . never mind sex."

"Exactly," Natalie said and stared him in the eyes until he dropped his gaze.

"As I said . . . it won't do you a bit of good to try to wiggle out of this. The fact remains that you are drinking too much . . . and doing it in front of your own child. I'm not standing for it one more minute."

Natalie laughed. "Oh really? And what do you think you can do about it?"

"I'm glad you asked. Because as it happens, I've given that quite a bit of thought. I think what I'll do is, if you don't stop the drinking immediately, the next time you come home stinking, you won't get in. I will file for divorce immediately . . . you know the grounds . . . and you will never see your daughter again."

"You're bluffing!"

"Try me!"

She could not seem to stop the feeling of panic in her chest. But he'd never see it; she'd never show it. She wasn't *that* drunk, no matter what he thought. "I don't get it, Jerry. Since you claim you've always known about my . . . men, and you've been boiling about my drinking . . . what took you so long? I mean, why are you warning me? Why not just lock me out?"

"Good question, Natalie. Yes, you're absolutely right. I want to give you a chance to change. Because, as it happens, I love my daughter. And, as it happens, I believe children should have two parents . . ."

"And, as it happens," Natalie echoed sarcastically, "you like giving the impression of being happily married, pater familias, and head of the fucking household!"

But he only smiled. "That's right. As it happens, I like all of that. I like it all enough so that I'm willing to put up with a lot of your nonsense. But not when it affects Melissa. Is that perfectly clear?"

He wasn't going to kick her out. She couldn't feature it.

She had been sitting, tensed, waiting for it. Waiting for him to tell her to get out, he'd had it. His capacity for punishment was apparently endless.

And what of hers? Why, why, was she sitting in a virtual sweat of relief? Why didn't she just pick herself up and take herself out of this travesty of a marriage?

I don't want to, she answered herself with a shock. I don't want to leave. But why not? I could take Melissa with me; I'm going to be making a whole *lot* of money, we could live very well, and Audrey could just come along with us.

Jake. It was Jake. All these years, ever since she went back to M & M, she had known that Jake was there. Funny how she had never realized how important he was to her. Now she knew. A few weeks ago, if Jerry had pulled this stunt on her, she'd have laughed in his face. Because she could have told the whole scene to Jake the next day, played it all out again, and Jake would have transformed it into a comedy sequence. They would have laughed and laughed about it. Funny old Jerry, funny little Natalie. And then he would have fucked her to a fare-thee-well. And then they would have fed each other from one of his famous picnics. And then they would have laughed about that, too. Everything was fun with Jake, even things that weren't really funny. But now . . . now . . . where was the fun? Nothing was funny if you were alone. Nothing was fun if there was no one to listen. Who could she talk to, tomorrow, about this? When she thought about tomorrow, a great, empty gulf yawned in front of her. Jake wasn't around anymore, not for her. She had been married, these past eight years, to Jake/Jerry. Jake was gone and Jerry threatening to do the same, and she couldn't face it.

Now she answered Jerry. "Perfectly clear," she said. "I personally don't think I have a drinking problem. I can stop any time. But if you feel it's affecting Melissa, well . . . I'll take your word for it. Okay." Now she gave him a big, brilliant smile. "Shall we drink to that, Jerry dear?" she said, lifting her glass to him.

Jerry heaved himself up out of the leather chair so that

he loomed over her. He hitched up his baggy pants and smiled down at her.

"Don't be such a sore loser, Nat," Jerry said pleasantly. And before she could answer back, he waved the agreement paper that he was still holding and with an exaggerated bow, handed it to her. "Oh—and by the way—" he added, ambling out of the room, "congratulations."

25 The Cat's Meow

"Taste this," Jake said, stuffing a morsel of spiced chicken between her lips. "Good, huh?"

"Mmmm," Barbara agreed, savoring the subtle blend of flavors flooding her mouth. What a meal. Jake had said, when they walked into the tiny take-out restaurant, "You'll taste stuff you've never tasted before, baby." She had found it hard to believe, but it was absolutely true. He had ordered seven different dishes to bring home and she had never had any of them before in her life. It had become a delicious game: to try to figure out what was in each of them. Now she licked her lips, closed her eyes, and said, "Ginger. Saffron . . . Bean curd of some kind . . . oh, I don't care, just give me some more."

Jake laughed and reached into the bowl again. "Keep your eyes closed this time," he ordered. She tipped her head back, opening her lips a little, and gasped as she felt his mouth on hers, lightly. Her eyes flew open, and she found herself looking into his laughing blue ones. He pulled back right away, saying, "Surprise!"

Barbara smiled at him. It was a surprise, all right. The surprise was that her lips were tingling and her heart was racing from that momentary contact. To quickly change the subject, she said brightly, "This room really worked out just fine, Jake. It looks wonderful."

"It does, doesn't it?" He beamed.

It was a fairly small room and he had painted it all shiny white, including the floor, which magically enlarged the whole space. You felt, in a way, as if you were floating. The two captain's beds were pushed into a corner, in an L-shape, covered with thick, bouncy cushions. Jake was sprawled across one of them, a huge scarlet tray placed in front of him, with all the Chinese food heaped in white plastic bowls that she herself had chosen at the Pottery Barn. She was snuggled into the corner, five or six pillows behind her back, shoeless, cross-legged and comfy, being plied with scrumptious tastes and chilled white wine. Mozart woodwind quintets were playing on the stereo, the drapes were drawn across the windows, a fat red ginger-jar lamp gave out a gentle light, and a second bottle of wine was chilling in the cooler she had also picked out. Everywhere she looked, she saw her choices, and they all worked. The room was clean, shiny, white, black, and red, extremely modern yet comfortable.

The one thing she had thought would be strange wasn't. "I never thought those Kliban cat sheets would work out," she remarked, "but they did." The two of them both regarded the long draperies across almost the entire window wall, resplendent with cartoon cats dressed as Superman, red capes streaming out behind.

Jake laughed again. "Why ever not? I think they're terrific."

"Well, when you first suggested them, I thought no no, it's all wrong, too cutesy-poo. I liked that red-and-white grid pattern, remember? I wanted something more . . . I don't know . . . *serious*."

"Serious. Yeah. Listen: I lived for years with a lady who was so serious . . . I mean, everything in our house was mud color, so it wouldn't show the dirt."

Barbara held out her balloon wineglass, and he poured an inch or two into it. She giggled. "You know, Jake, with this huge glass, I'm not sure how much I'm drinking."

"That's the whole idea, heh heh, m'dear."

She sipped at the wine, it was a nice inexpensive Soave, one that Mark would surely disdain . . . and then she put Mark firmly out of her thoughts. She was furious with

Mark. Since the night a week ago when he had pushed her away, they had spoken only to exchange vital information. He had come back to their bed but they slept rigidly back to back, as far from each other as they could get without falling off the edge. "Yes, I know what you mean," she said. "My hu—Mark is a very serious person, especially about the house. Well, of course, that's his profession. But still . . . oh hell, it gets to be a pain in the ass, fussing over every little hinge and switchplate. And guess who gets to run all over the city looking for the just-right, perfect whatever . . . Of course, in the end, it's all just gorgeous, just perfect, so I guess he's right . . . oh dear, this is terrible. I hate people who complain about their spouses. It's not fair when he's not here to defend himself."

"Hey," Jake said, with a twinkle, refilling his own glass. "I hope to *hell* your husband isn't here. I mean, that's the whole idea . . . only kidding, only kidding. And anyway, you can say any goddam thing that pops into your beauteous head to wonderful me. What the hell else are friends for, if not to bore them with your problems . . . only kidding, only kidding . . ."

Barbara put a hand on his shoulder. "Jake. You don't have to keep telling me you're only kidding. I know you're only kidding . . . I *think*." She was gratified when he threw his head back and laughed.

"But now, my dear Barbara . . ." And he put his hand on her shoulder, smiling into her eyes. "I'm not kidding. If something's bothering you, just tell old Uncle Jacob . . ."

Barbara sank back against the cushions. She could feel herself relaxing, and it was so nice. It had been terribly tense at home lately . . . not just Mark, really, but everything. Jen would hardly talk to her, and Scott had become enamored of racquetball and seemed to be living at the St. George Health Club these days. The house felt deserted. Here it was all new and cozy . . . and really, most of it was stuff she had bought for Jake. She *should* feel at home . . . and she did.

"Oh, it's nothing much," she said to Jake. "But Mark and I . . . I guess I have to explain that for years, I felt I had the absolutely perfect marriage. I know it sounds naive

and stupid but it seemed perfect, really. We never fought, we liked all the same things, we worked together on the house . . . You know, I realize now that about half of our married life was spent working on that house. I think that over half of our conversations were about the house . . . It makes you wonder—what would have happened to us if we hadn't had the house . . . oh well, never mind, it doesn't matter now . . ."

"Yeah . . . all water under the dam . . ."

It took her a second to get it, and she reached over and gave his hand a little squeeze. "We had one helluva fight," she went on, "the night of the taste test, you remember, when Peter kept Millard and me so late. Honestly I sometimes wonder about him, he's so erratic and crazy. But try to explain that to Mark! He just doesn't want to hear it. Anything I say about work, his one and only response is to say, 'Quit!' Well, I don't *want* to quit . . ."

"Oh, please. Don't do that," Jake murmured; and she suddenly realized he had never let go of her hand. And, in fact, she didn't want him to. His hand was warm and solid-feeling, comforting. It was nice, after this past week of isolation. She had always liked holding hands.

"Stop kidding," she said. "Of course I'm not going to quit. I love working. I love getting out into the world. I should have done it years ago. And I can't help feeling that if he really cared about me, he'd understand how important it is to me . . . oh, never mind. He blames every little thing that goes wrong—from a defective light switch to a kid coming home late—on my working! Can you believe that? My job is causing the disintegration of the entire Western world! It's ridiculous . . . oh dear, I'm sorry, Jake. I'm here to celebrate, remember? I shouldn't be babbling on, complaining like that . . . It must be the wine. What will you think of me?"

She was just a little bit light-headed, pleasantly so. It was almost like a feeling of floating. Jake was rubbing his thumb slowly over the back of her hand; it felt warm and nice. She snuggled herself a bit deeper into the pillows and then giggled.

"What? What's funny, suddenly?"

"The cats. Those silly cats with their red capes . . . they're all over the couches and the pillows. I get the feeling thousands of eyes are watching me . . . oh what the hell, who cares?" She held out her wineglass again.

Jake took the glass from her hand, but instead of filling it and giving it back, he put it carefully on the floor. Then, just as deliberately, he leaned forward and, putting one hand alongside her cheek to guide her face, put his mouth on hers. Again, she felt that jolt in her heart. His lips were soft, firm, gentle, demanding, all at once. She couldn't help kissing him back, just a little. It was delicious! They both moaned a little, then they both pulled back, looking at each other with some surprise, and then both leaned forward again to try it once more. When they pulled apart this time, they both murmured, "Delicious," and laughed and kissed again.

Barbara drew back, not too far, she didn't want to get too far away from him, and said, "You know, you're the very first man I've ever kissed, besides—"

"Oh come *on*, Barbara."

She giggled. "No, really. I started to go steady with Mark when I was eighteen. The last other males I ever kissed were *boys*. And they were nothin' like *this*." She held her lips up and he said softly, "Yeah, let's kiss like grownups some more. But first . . ." And he put the tray of food down on the floor, coming quickly back to bend his head to hers. This time, he kissed her cheek, her nose, her eyelids, swiftly moving to press his mouth to her throat. She could feel her pulse fluttering wildly; it was becoming difficult to breathe normally. Somehow he had moved closer and closer, and now he was curled around her. He whispered, "Oh God, you smell delicious and taste even better," and as he said it, he slid his hands under her shirt and spread them over her back. She had never felt so completely encompassed, so completely held, and with a moan, she felt herself sink, relaxed into his embrace.

When he instructed her to lift her arms, she did so without question, not even objecting when he stripped the shirt over her head and unfastened her bra. "Now turn over," he said and again, without question, she did as she was told.

He stretched her out, belly down, onto the soft cushions and then kneeling astride her, he began with sure hands to massage and knead the muscles in her back and shoulders. The gentle insistent pressure seemed to draw every bit of tension from her. Wherever his hands moved, wherever he touched her, she felt herself letting go. Gone was the pain and the misery and the stress of dealing with Mark. Gone, in fact, was all thought. Her back was the focus of every sense. It was like being washed back and forth by a strong but cradling tide, inexorable, timeless, soothing, releasing. His hands moved down to her lower back, pressing, smoothing, rubbing. Her breathing quickened, and when she felt his mouth now on her back, swift little kisses all along the spine, she was overcome with shudders of pleasure. "Good, good," she heard him murmur, as from a great distance. There was a roaring in her ears and a suffusion of heat in her loins. She wriggled in her pleasure, pushing her buttocks up into the palms of his waiting curved hands. Suddenly, she could wait no longer. "Make love to me, Jake," she said, in a voice surprisingly hoarse.

He said nothing, but proceeded to completely undress first her and then himself. Barbara lay on her back, watching as he stripped the clothes from his lean, tight body. She was fascinated; it was so different from Mark's. He was long-muscled and bony, with freckles marching across his chest and shoulders and a small round rear. She had a fleeting thought—that he was too thin—and then her eyes were drawn to the rigid curve of penis that thrust aggressively out from his narrow hips. Then all thought disappeared and she heard herself say, "I want you in me . . . *now*." And he flung himself down on her, whispering, "Oh God, you are so beautiful, you are so gorgeous, so lush, so soft, so tender, so smooth, you feel so good . . ." His entering her was as inevitable and as natural as her own breathing. She could not get close enough, she could not get enough of him; she thrust her hips into his and wrapped her legs around him hugging with all her might, and biting at his shoulder and licking at his smooth skin. He was delicious, his cock was fantastic, it filled her, it stroked her, it made her feel like a girl again. She could not recall the last time she had been so aroused, so free, so

ready to go her limit and give everything! It was so slow and so good. Several times she felt that he was nearing his climax; yet he never came and he never stopped moving. He was incredible. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she realized that he had made not one demand of her. Instead, he seemed intent upon completely satiating her hungers, in whatever way he could think of. And he was so slow and careful and thoughtful. "Here?" he would say. "Like this? Does this feel good? Yes?" Turn here—on her belly, on her back, on her side. And all the time, it was so slow and so good. She felt as if she were flying free of space and free of time.

Finally, he gave in to the demands of his own body, plunging deep into her with cries of pleasure, his buttocks pumping. Then they lay, soaked with sweat, smiling, wrapped in each other's arms for long, long moments.

The first words out of his mouth startled her into total alertness. It was like being pulled out of a sound sleep. "When we're married," he began, "we'll have to get a new bed—"

"Jake!" she protested, her voice climbing the register in her dismay. "What are you saying?"

"I love you and you love me and of course we're going to get married and live happily ever after." He laughed and added, "Of course, we'll have to get divorced first, but what's a little divorce between friends." And he reached up to nibble on her earlobe.

Barbara pulled away from him, shivering as the chilly air hit her damp body. "No, no, no . . ." she said and then, unable to think of anything more intelligent: "No. No, no, no. No!"

Jake pushed himself up onto one elbow. "Do I hear an objection? No wait, don't go away mad. I get it. You don't want to get a new bed."

"Jake! Not funny!"

He threw his hands up in surrender. "I know that. Okay. Do your worst."

She clambered out of the tangle of pillows, searching frantically for her clothes. "All I can say, Jake, is for a guy who takes his sweet time making love . . . and you certainly do . . . and it certainly was a sweet time . . . you sure

do come up with *some* notions double quick. Get married! Hey! I'm already married."

"Unhappily . . ." he muttered.

"I knew I shouldn't have unloaded all my problems on you . . . Eighteen years . . . Well, you don't go getting a divorce just like that. Okay, I'm furious with Mark, and I think I've just come to realize that we have some serious problems. But still, Jake . . . I mean . . ." She paused and looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Oh, Jake. You were just joking again. Weren't you?"

He stared at his Superman cats on the window draperies, and then he turned his head and stared at her, looking right into her eyes. For a moment or two, his face was surprisingly solemn and then, to her relief, one eye closed in a slow wink. "Sure, baby. I was just joking again. You know me. But let's us play house from time to time!" And he laughed.

Barbara got dressed, quickly. She realized with a start that she was not embarrassed at all, as she might have expected after all that sudden passion. She felt perfectly at ease with Jake. She also felt cold. "I'm not getting dressed because I don't want you to see me . . . it's chilly in here."

"You don't have to explain."

"No, really. It was wonderful. It was better than wonderful. It was special."

"For me too, Barbara. You have no idea how special."

She smiled at him. "Yes, I heard you called me the Shiksa of Your Dreams."

He made a face. "Good work, Nat," he called to the ceiling. "Always ready to get in there and help out as best you can." He shook his head. "Sorry about that, Barbara."

"Oh, I didn't mind it. I thought it was funny. I think everything you say is funny . . . oh dear, did I say something wrong?"

"No. Nothing wrong. Nothing at all."

She finished getting her hair brushed and glanced at the watch on her wrist. "Oh my heavens," she said, a little too expressively. "It's nearly ten. I really have to get home . . . the kids, you know."

"Yeah, I know."

She went to the closet where he had hung her coat—was it just a few hours ago? Unbelievable! What could she say to him? she wondered. She knew he hadn't been joking. The man thought himself in love with her. She felt terrible, but there was no way she could return that feeling. She was very fond of him, but still . . . She looked over at him sadly, lying so long and lanky and vulnerable on top of those silly Superman cat sheets.

"Jake? Listen. I'm sorry."

"Hey! What for? It was super, remember?"

"You know damn well that's not—"

"Hey, Barbara. Not to worry. Ships that pass in the night and so forth. See you in the kitchen tomorrow, baby?"

"Sure." Why was she so near tears? Who was she sorrowing for? She nearly ran for the door. As she let herself out, she could hear him singing "*Arrivederci*, Barbara," and she smiled.

In the taxi, on the way home, it surprised her to realize that she didn't care if Mark never came near her again.

26 Home Movies

New Year's Eve. And like every other New Year's Eve since they were married, the Valentines were spending a quiet evening at home together. And, like every other New Year's Eve, Barbara was busy in the kitchen. The family tradition was that each member of the family got to pick his or her favorite dish and that she got to prepare it. Before, she had done it with great pleasure, a gift to her loved ones. This year was different. There was something flat about it all, somehow. Well, she thought, hulling strawberries and slicing pineapple semiautomatically, what was the family fun in being all alone in the kitchen? Jen had been hibernating or meditating—doing something—up in her room since 4:00 in the afternoon and here it was, already 7:00 and not a peep out of her. Scott was at the St. George playing racquetball—as indeed he was most of the time these days. And as for Mark . . . He'd gone next door for a friendly drink an hour ago, and that was the last she'd seen of *him.*

She pushed a stray tendril of hair behind one ear and, leaning on the counter, poured herself a glass of chilled rosé, sipping slowly and staring sightlessly at the huge Christmas tree, all white and gold, that dominated the dining room. As always, they had drunk quite a bit of champagne on Christmas Eve as they decorated the tree *en famille.* There hadn't been an awful lot of sprightly conversation; but then, she couldn't really remember if there ever had been. And that night, lying in bed with her back turned to Mark, as had been the case for two weeks now, she had heard him shift and a moment later, his hands slid

over her breasts, caressing her and fingering her nipples as he pressed his loins into her buttocks. She was still angry with him but what the hell, she remembered thinking as his hands took a well-practiced route down her belly and into the soft place between her thighs, it's Christmas; and she'd drunk a lot of champagne and she guessed she'd held out long enough. Mark was terribly excited, she noted with a flash of triumph, and it didn't take long. She fell asleep even before he withdrew from her and so of course she never saw his face. Since then, things had been more or less back to normal, although she felt that she was holding back a part of herself.

She put the wineglass down and surveyed the counter near the ovens, where she had lined up all the ingredients for tonight's feast. Her choice, a giant tray of pineapple, kiwi, and strawberries from Dean and DeLuca, was already arranged and in the refrigerator, needing only a last-minute garnish of mint. Scott had ordered hot meatball heroes, and the pot of sauce and meat was simmering fragrantly on the back of the stove. As for Jennifer's choice—she made a wry face—tofu and black mushrooms were sitting there. Maybe she'd do them next and save the hardest for the last, Mark's feta and spinach bourrek. She'd take out the leaves of phyllo dough at the last minute, then melt the butter, then put the damp towels over the dough, then . . . oh hell, it wasn't any fun at *all* this year. What was wrong with her? Maybe they had just outgrown this particular tradition. The Easter basket routine had been scratched long ago and the 6:00 A.M. Christmas morning present-opening ritual had also gone the way of the Model T. So why were they clinging to this one, when the kids were teenagers and would far rather be doing their own things tonight—they were staying under protest, both of them—and she would far rather . . . What? she didn't know.

Run away from home? How silly. And yet, ever since she'd read that article, was it in *Self* or *Ms.*, about Runaway Mothers, the idea had been tugging at the back of her thoughts. For a couple of weeks now, she had been soothing herself to sleep each night by constructing an

elaborate fantasy, in which she left this house—Mark's house, really—and magically found herself somewhere in Manhattan in a beautiful little apartment all her own, like Jake's but bigger and with a bedroom and probably a nice galley kitchen. In fact, each night the apartment became clearer and clearer in her head, as she decided on her color scheme—blue and yellow, she thought—and her furniture and even which accessories she would take from here. Planning it calmed her down and gave her such pleasure . . . But of course she didn't really mean it. First of all, she couldn't live on her tiny salary and second, come *on*, just because she was mad at her husband for the first time in 18 years, was that any reason to dream of running away from home? Well, if she ever really did, there was one thing for sure she'd be taking with her, and that was Grammy Taylor's quilt. It was still spread on their bed, and Mark had said not one word about it.

Smiling to herself, Barbara took another sip of wine and thought, Yes, when I do move out, if I ever do, Grammy's quilt is going with me, if nothing else does. She had been mechanically putting together the bourrek, brushing on the melted butter, lifting layer after layer of paper-thin phyllo, mixing the feta and the spinach, adding the pignoli, and now it was finished and she couldn't even recall doing it, really. She laughed at herself and thought, I hope I haven't forgotten something important, and put it into the oven. As she pulled herself up the stairway, she sighed heavily. It didn't feel like New Year's Eve at all, it didn't feel like any kind of celebration. Well, she would put on her silver hostess pjs and pile her hair atop her head and throw some glitter onto her eyelids, and maybe it would all somehow change into a holiday by midnight.

By 9:00, they had magically assembled in the dining room, all four of them, all of them dressed up . . . well, more or less, since Jennifer's idea of dressing up these days meant clean jeans and an Indian blouse . . . and were toasting each other in champagne. Her caviar and chopped egg pie was nearly demolished and Mark had already set up the movie projector in the living room, removing the largest painting from the wall to make a screen.

Coming up was the part of the evening the kids had always loved: the home movies. Every New Year's Eve, each child reached into Mark's neatly organized rows of reels and blindly chose one. And every New Year's Eve, they watched whichever reel of film happened to be picked.

Lifting his glass, Mark said, "To the Valentines." The children mumbled something; she said nothing, just lifted her glass and drank from it, waiting for the champagne to do something to her. "Shall we go in and see ourselves as once we were?" she said, and it seemed to her that the others were just as relieved as she to have something to do that wouldn't require conversation.

It was also traditional that Mark thread the machine without telling Barbara which year she was going to see. These movies were generally shot during the summer, at the house they owned on Fire Island, and generally on the Fourth of July. Mark liked to call them his own red-white-and-blue movies. So she settled back on the sofa, sipped at her champagne, and waited to see what might be revealed.

"Turn out the lights, will you, Scott?" So like Mark, she thought. He was right near the switch, but he just had to exercise his authority at every opportunity. Strange how she'd only recently begun to notice that. Maybe she was just picking on everything because she was still annoyed with him.

As soon as the first frame flickered onto the wall, Barbara knew that it was an early one, because there were carefully designed titles at the beginning. "Valentines' Day at the Beach," it said. He had used the kids' alphabet blocks to spell out the words, on a background of sand.

And there it was, the sprawling modern house, its cedar siding just beginning to turn that silvery gray that she found so lovely. They hadn't put the big deck on yet, so it must have been before Jennifer started nursery school. She was right. There was toddler Jennifer, stumbling across the sandy yard, pointing a chubby finger at . . . baby Scott lying on a blanket. "Oh my God," Scott yelled. "I *hate* baby pictures! Take it off!" To which Mark laughed and said, "What do you mean, take it off? There wasn't anything to take *off*"—referring to the infant's nakedness, Barbara supposed. "Oh very funny, Dad," said Scott and

hunched himself down in his chair. Barbara stole a look at Jennifer. Did nothing interest her anymore? She sat slumped in her chair, arms crossed over her chest, staring at the screen. The camera then focused on the house and the young tanned Barbara came out of the front door looking self-conscious. Barbara well remembered how she had felt. It was Mark's notion that you couldn't just take pictures of people; they had to be acting at something. And he was always having her doing something that seemed silly. Well, her face showed it. She was very uneasy . . . but very pretty, the older Barbara thought with some surprise. So how come, she wondered, I was so grateful to him for marrying me? I was very good-looking, goddammit! Look at her; she's lovely! She stared at the slender, radiant girl in her cotton print sundress, carrying that goddam picnic basket. It had been completely empty but he wanted some kind of story. Oh yes, now she remembered. And there was the big red heart pasted on the side of the basket.

"Now do you see how silly that was?" she said.

And Mark said, "What? What was silly? You look adorable."

"The basket. The heart. We didn't need that."

"Well, I think it makes it much more interesting . . . Oh, oh, look Barbie, in a minute Artie takes the camera and shoots the picture of us all together, going to the beach."

Sure enough, there they were, Mark, stripped to the waist, in faded denim cutoffs, skin-tight, already tanned to a dark bronze, his hair glinting in the sunshine, one strong brown arm cradling the tiny, plump, rosy baby; the other arm around Barbara's waist. She held Jennifer's hand but her entire attention, her entire being, was focused on the dark-skinned male by her side. Seeing the young Barbara and the young Mark gazing, enraptured, at each other, the two beautiful children almost an afterthought, it nearly took her breath away. Suddenly, in a complete picture, she remembered the passionate, all-consuming love of those golden days. She could smell the salt of the ocean and hear its soothing thud-thud on the beach. She could feel his cool lips upon her sun-heated belly and see the smoky desire in his eyes. Sitting in the perfect living room all these years later, a shudder of remembered desire went through her

loins, and tears pricked at her eyes. God, how wonderful it had been then. She watched, mesmerized, as that gorgeous sun-browned family frolicked and embraced at the ocean's frothy edge.

When it was over, she found she couldn't comment and only half listened to Mark's rumbling reminiscences. He was having the time of his life. He always enjoyed this; it reinforced his image of himself. She got up and went back into the dining room to pour herself a large goblet of champagne. She was beginning to get a headache.

The second reel had already begun when she got back to the living room. The first thing she noticed was that Jennifer was sitting up, looking intently at the film. She immediately saw why: because there was a more recent Jennifer, 12-year-old Jennifer, running across the dunes, her shining hair bouncing, gleaming with good health, her skin the color of a cookie, rosy-cheeked and laughing. Scott was right behind, mimicking her every move and grinning like a monkey. Good God, Barbara thought with a sinking heart, look how she's changed.

"Just *look* at you, Jen," she breathed, about to add, You'd better stop dieting so much when Jennifer burst out: "I was so *fat* and *disgusting*!"

"Oh yeah, Jennifer," Scott countered in his best sarcastic voice, "really gross . . . like a normal person. You hardly look like a skeleton at all! Jeez, how can you stand to look at that person?"

He was right, Barbara thought. Then Jennifer had looked healthy, beautiful. She had actually forgotten how outgoing a child her daughter used to be. She had actually become accustomed to that withdrawn, moody, too-thin teenager. It was a shock.

"Jennifer! Tomorrow we go straight to Dr. Levin."

"You can't," Scott said, "not on New Year's Day."

"Then the day after tomorrow. But tomorrow, Jennifer, you'll start the New Year off right and eat three regular, nutritious meals."

"If you wish your gross additive-filled foods to cross my lips," Jennifer said with a tiny smile, "you will have to force-feed me."

Barbara opened her mouth to answer this when Jennifer suddenly added, smiling more broadly than ever, "Ah, and here is my proof of the evil red meat and sugars can do . . ."

Barbara's eyes whipped to the film and there she was, Barbara of three years ago, thirty-five pounds overweight, crammed into a tennis dress at least a size too small. There was an ugly roll of fat around her middle, and her thighs—! She stood arm in arm with Mark, looking at him with those same cowlike adoring eyes; and he handsome as ever—maybe even more so, to tell the truth—tanned skin a dark contrast to his tennis whites and even whiter teeth, patted her rear end in a meaningful way, mugging at the camera, mouthing the words, "round and firm and fully packed." Oh yes, she remembered that Fourth of July now. He had humiliated her over and over again, in front of the kids, in front of their friends. She remembered. He had continued to make cracks the whole time Artie was taking these pictures, until she was ready to cry.

But of course, instead of crying in her rage, she had rushed into the kitchen, throwing open the refrigerator door, and looking frantically for whatever looked filling, starchy, satisfying. There was a big bowl of chilled macaroni sitting on the bottom shelf, unsalted, unspiced, unseasoned. She reached in with her hand, without moving the bowl, bent over almost double, stuffing this cold, bland macaroni into her mouth, fistful by fistful, just cramming it in, hardly chewing it, swallowing it and pushing more in: an orgy of masochism. In the end, she sank to the floor, gasping for air, filled with shame and guilt, and leaned her head against the still open refrigerator door.

When the screen door slammed, she quickly struggled to her feet and the door swung itself closed. It was Artie Schwartz, bearded, bald, and thin as a rail. "I finished my yearly stint as Cecil B. DeMille," he said, "and I come for my beer, lady." Then he frowned a little. "Hey, Barb," he said in a gentler tone, "don't let your old man get to you. He likes to tease, that's all."

To her chagrin, her eyes immediately filled with tears that spilled down her cheeks. "I'm sorry, Artie," she sniffed.

"Hey! Barb!" He walked over to her and gripped her

shoulders. "Don't cry, honey. So you're a little plump by the national standard . . . what the hell do they know! You look good to me!" And to her utter and everlasting amazement, he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her full on the mouth, tongue and all. She didn't like it, but she didn't have the heart to pull away. He was being so sweet, she wouldn't ever want to hurt his feelings. Nice old Artie. When he stopped, she patted him on the shoulder, still sniffling a little, and said, "You're a pal, Arthur, and Linda's a lucky lady."

In answer to Jennifer, Barbara said dryly: "What I ate was a helluva lot more caloric than red meat, baby. I could have joined Overeaters Anonymous. I really worked at it."

"I can't believe it, Barbie doll. I hardly remember you *that* heavy . . . Let's see," and Mark reversed the film and showed her again. Barbara choked down the angry words that sprang to her lips. She had a sneaky feeling that he was doing this partly to get even with her for the weeks without sex; and partly to admire his own muscular body. But all she said, finally, in a calm voice, was: "Oh yeah. I remember that day. Right after we finished this film Artie Schwartz came into the kitchen and made a pass at me."

"Aw come on, Mom!" Scott hooted. Even Jennifer was giggling. Well, she supposed the notion of good-natured, hen-pecked Artie Schwartz coming on to someone twice his weight *was* rather ludicrous; and she laughed herself.

"You're making that up!" Mark sneered.

"Nope," she said, "not at all. Some men evidently aren't so picky about weight in their women. Some men evidently *prefer* their women soft and buxom!"

A minute later, the film ran out and Scott turned on the lights. The Valentines blinked at each other silently. Barbara, uncomfortable, excused herself right away and went to arrange their feast on the dining-room table.

This was the time when, in years past, they had all gathered together, giggling over the old movies, and had a grand time tasting each other's favorites, rehashing old family jokes and exchanging well-worn teases. Tonight, everyone was quieter than usual, she thought. The table looked beautiful even with its rather bizarre assortment of

foods. She had taken down the best Rosenthal china with the simple platinum band and her favorite Ittala glasses with the teardrop trapped in the center of the base. The tablecloth was bright blue linen, and the napkins were blue and white stripes. She had put out her entire collection of candlesticks, two dozen assorted sizes and shapes, all white candles and all lit. She had a creeping feeling that she had simply tried too hard. All those candles! Suddenly it seemed excessive, in very bad taste. Oh, never mind! "Come and get it!" she called.

Barbara put dabs of everything onto her plate, including Jennifer's strong-smelling black mushrooms and the bland tofu. The aroma from the spiced heros fought with the subtle flavors in the bourrek and she found herself becoming quite irritated with the meal. She slid a look at her husband. He seemed to be eating everything with gusto. Scott disdained everything but his heros, but she had given up on teenaged boys. He had taken to making terrible faces at just about anything that wasn't covered with Italian tomato sauce. And, oh dear, Jennifer. After seeing those movies, it made her heart ache to look at that bony body and that pinched look that came from eating all the wrong things and not enough of them. What had happened to her beautiful fresh-faced daughter? Here she was, carefully scraping sauce from the tofu on her plate and putting a tentative fork into the platter of bourrek, bringing out about three crumbs of spinach that she carefully laid on her plate. The hero, she ignored. Even the fruit got short shrift. Two strawberries, that's all. *Two strawberries.* If it weren't so exasperating, it would have been funny.

"*Jennifer!*" Mark barked suddenly. "That's not enough to feed a very small baby bird."

"It's fine," she said, turning a cube of pineapple over and over thoughtfully and finally discarding it.

"Goddammit, Jennifer, you eat!"

She stared at him defiantly. "No."

Color rose rapidly in his face. He scraped his chair back with a violent movement and came to his feet. "I said *eat.* You'd better do as I say, young lady, or—"

"Or what?" Jennifer demanded, her voice dropping even

further. "You can't hurt me. I have found the quiet place within. Nothing can touch me."

"You'd better put some food into that quiet place within, and you'd better do it very goddam fast, miss."

Barbara stared at Mark with some consternation. He was becoming quite purple. "Mark," she ventured, but he waved her down imperiously. "Your mother worked very hard on this very special dinner and you'd better show your appreciation or I'll know the reason why—!" His voice had risen dangerously.

Scott looked alarmed and moved to his sister's side, an arm laid protectively over her shoulders. "Hey, Dad! take it easy!"

"You're asking for it too young man. Mind your own business. *Jennifer*! I'm going to count to ten and before I get there, I want to see a good-size piece of good food in your mouth!"

"No."

He advanced on her, his brawny arm raised threateningly. Jennifer lifted her chin, daring him to try something; and Barbara was horribly afraid he would take up the challenge. He was as furious, as blindly, unthinkingly enraged as she had ever seen him. She leaped to her feet, her chair falling over backward as she rushed to put herself between Mark and her daughter.

Her heart was thumping as adrenaline pumped into her. "Mark!" she said in a voice she hardly recognized as her own. "Don't you dare!"

"Out of my way, Barbara. I warn you."

"Never! Leave her alone. If she doesn't want to eat, she doesn't have to. She's not a baby anymore. We don't have that kind of control over her anymore."

"That's right! No control is right! Ever since you started working, you're damn right, she's gone haywire!"

"Again with that old song and dance? Ever since I started working? I'm tired of hearing that!" Her voice rose. "According to you, all the troubles in Poland began when I started working . . . the melting polar ice cap is a direct result of my starting working . . . inflation only began when I started working . . . !"

"I don't know about your wiseass remarks, Barbara. But I do know that this family has been disintegrating ever since you went to work at that goddam phony ad agency!"

Barbara's chin jutted at him. "Oh, really," she grated, hands on hips. "Funny, isn't it. You always bragged about my cooking when I cooked for you and your business associates. Oh sure. 'Barbie doll could make a fortune,' " she mimicked, " 'if she ever decided to cook for money.' Oh yes. But when Barbie doll manages to land a real live job for real live money, oh that's different. Suddenly that's a goddam mortal sin, a goddam joke."

"That's not fair! I only say what I see!"

"Oh come off it, Mark. You've made a career out of belittling me, my job, my associates, the whole thing, ever since I started. It's not bad enough that every day you find an opportunity to blame my working for some other failure of Western society . . . but you ridicule me constantly. My business is phony . . . or meaningless . . . or stupid . . . My work is 'rattling pots and pans' or it's 'following that damn fairy around the kitchen' . . . or *something* stupid."

"You call *me* stupid!!?"

"Yes. You! It started the first day we were married and you made me get rid of Grammy's quilt!—remember?"

"Oh Christ, Barbara!"

"Then, fifteen years later, there we were chasing all over New Hampshire because suddenly American quilts were *in* . . . Suddenly it was okay. You never even apologized. You started on Day One and you have never stopped making me feel like a piece of ignorant shit."

"Barbara! Jesus! The language. In front of the children!"

"I was a new bride and I told you Grammy's quilt was important to me and you couldn't even wait until we'd made love. You stood there and watched me fold it away and then you threw me on the bed to reward me for doing as I was told . . . Teaching me how my form could follow your function, indeed!"

"I can't believe you. After all these years, you're still holding a grudge about a dumb thing like that."

"*You* were the dumb thing, Mark." Her voice was becoming hoarse with fatigue. She was only dimly aware of

her children, huddling together, backing away into a safe corner.

"Just like a woman to nurse bad feelings so long. So I made a mistake. I was overenthusiastic about my profession. Jesus Christ, you remember, Bauhaus was like a religion to me."

"But I was the woman you loved, the one you loved enough to ask to share your life. But not enough to let her keep her grandmother's quilt on the bed!" Tears began coursing down her cheeks as all the pent-up anger boiled up in her chest.

"You're hysterical, Barbara. This is ridiculous. Try to calm yourself. And let's save all of this for when we're private, shall we?"

"No, we shall not, Mark. I've been saving and saving and saving all of this for years and years and years, and now I want to say it all."

"What else?"

She could not stand that smug superior look. "All these years you've called me Barbie doll—even though I told you from the very beginning that I hated it. Well, I'm not a Barbie doll, I'm not a wind-up toy that comes to life whenever you enter the room. And that's what you can't stand!

"I know what's really bothering you about my working. Ever since I started working, you've had to face the fact that I'm an adult human being with a life and a will of my own. That's the only thing that's changed since I started working!"

"Gee, Mom," Scott put in from the corner. "*Everything's* changed since you started working."

She rounded on him. "You, too! What the hell do you people want of me anyway? Since I started this job, all meals have been prepared, all the shopping has been done, the house has been clean, the car has been kept in good repair, the bills have been paid, the gifts bought . . . I mean, my God, I've been working at two full-time jobs this whole time! Why are you all punishing me? Millions of women work! I'm not doing anything *terrible*!"

In a killing, icy voice, Mark said, "Look at your daughter and then tell me you're not doing anything terrible."

"You won't quit, will you! You just won't quit! You're incapable of believing that anyone else in the world *exists.* All right."

Now her heart was thumping so painfully, she could feel its beat in the pit of her stomach. Nausea, sharp and acid, rose in her throat, and when she drew in ragged breaths, her chest hurt. She stared at Mark. She could not stand him, she could not *stand* him. That handsome face, which had hypnotized her for so long, suddenly seemed too bland, too heavy. He needed a shave and he was getting jowly just like his father, and his eyes were squinted up small and bloodshot. Piggy, that's what they looked, piggy.

"All right," she repeated, amazed that her voice sounded so calm and normal. "I've done such a terrible job? Okay. I quit. *You* keep the house and do the chores and raise the children and cook the meals. Because I'm leaving." Into the stunned silence she moved, over to the table. She smiled sweetly at her husband and very carefully lifted the heavy silver tray upon which she had placed the Rosenthal coffee service, and then very carefully, smiling at him the whole time, she turned it upside down, watching with pleasure as dishes, silver, sugar, cream, hot coffee, miniature Danish, crème de cacao and all went flying across the table, splashing onto the floor, skidding, spilling, dripping, pouring, steaming, crashing, breaking, bouncing. "I quit," she repeated, still smiling; and still smiling, she left the room.

She ran down the front hall—no one else had said a word—and grabbed her down coat and handbag from the front closet. As she opened the street door, she heard Jennifer wail, "I knew it! I knew it! Ever since she went to work—" Barbara did not wait to hear the rest. She banged the heavy door behind her and ran out into the night.

27 Out of the Frying Pan

Barbara turned the key in the lock without thought, humming under her breath, and let herself into the apartment. The minute she came in, she smiled. Those silly Supercat sheets always made her smile, no matter how many times she saw them. Putting her bag down, she opened the refrigerator and took out the broccoli and the mushrooms for the stir-fry. The chicken breasts were still in the freezer and would stay there until 10 minutes before she was ready to cube them. At the same time, she'd defrost the raspberries for dessert, and if she felt like it, she'd whip the cream. She also took out the bottle of Soave that was chilling on its side, uncorked it and poured herself a generous glass. Sipping at it, she walked around straightening up, kicking off her high heels, plumping up pillows, and taking inventory as she went. The rug would have to be vacuumed after dinner tonight, then she'd make the grocery list for tomorrow and those curtains really had to come down, they were getting positively gray. Well, good thing they were sheets. They'd just pop right into the washer, and chances were, if she stayed by the dryer and got them right out, they wouldn't even need ironing at all—

She stopped abruptly in the middle of the room, and said aloud in a startled tone: *"Won't even need ironing!"* I don't believe what I just said. I don't believe it! Here I am, a separated woman, living in sin, independent and coura-

geous and what the devil am I spending my time thinking about? Domestic trivia! Domestic junk!

They're his curtains, goddam it! It's his apartment! Why have I taken it upon myself to become the resident housekeeper? She was fairly stunned by the thought and stood very still, as if it might escape her if she moved. Here she was, newly free after 18 years of taking care of other people, their things, and their welfare. And she had slipped right into the same old stultifying routine of lists and chores and meal plans and housework!

Listen here, she told herself, you're somebody's *mistress*. You should be lying on the chaise lounge, fresh from a bubble bath, wrapped in a negligee, sipping champagne and eating bonbons. And instead of that, you ridiculous woman, you slip into your rubber gloves, unable to resist the lure of Bon Ami and the call of the vacuum cleaner!

She stamped her foot, laughing a little at herself. I've even caught the habit of hyperbole from being with Jake so much these last six weeks. Well, say what you would about him, he was a lot of fun. Never a dull moment. Still, wasn't she expected, even here, to be the head housekeeper! Sure she was. He must have cooked for himself before she appeared on his doorstep . . . he must have taken care of his own laundry . . . he must have managed somehow to get the place cleaned up now and again. But the minute *she* came on the scene, magically it became her job. Who died and made her Head Housekeeper of the Western world? It was maddening! How come whenever she walked into a household, *any* household, winter, summer, beach, city, her own, now his . . . how come, *how come* the minute she walked in, she had 17 chores to do? How come the rest of them got to sit down and have their drink in leisure? How come the rest of them got to read the paper, put up their feet, and wait for dinner to be served?

She thumped down her wineglass in disgust and glared at those dumb, childish curtains with the stupid-looking flying cats. It was totally unfair. She was not going to fall right back into that trap . . . not after she finally had found the guts to escape the selfish, self-centered demands of Mark Valentine!

"Goddammit, Jake!" she muttered and marched herself

back to the counter to get her glass. "Goddammit, Jake, goddammit all to hell!" she said, her voice rising.

From behind her, Jake's was laughing: "How sweet it is to come home from a hard day at the office and hear you as you go cheerfully about your domestic chores."

Barbara whirled around. The grin on his face was infuriating. "*Your* domestic chores!" she snapped. "And don't give me that Happy Homemaker crap either, Jake Miller, I'm in a terrible mood."

"Oh really? I hadn't noticed, my dear, you hide it so well."

She stamped her foot. "Don't kid around, Jake. I mean it."

"Did anyone ever tell you you're beautiful when you get mad?"

"Jake!"

"Wait a minute," he said, in a tone that brought her up short, it was so serious. "Be right back." He left the room, closing the door firmly behind him and a second later reappeared, carrying in his arms the big potted plant from the hallway. "My darling, my darling," he intoned. "I have brought you some *flahrs* from the lush meadows and green fields . . ."

As usual, there was no use trying to be serious. He just wouldn't. She gave him a rather tight smile.

"So what's the problem?" He carefully put the big pot down and, avoiding her, got himself a glass of wine.

"The problem? The problem, my dear Jake, is *this*—" with her free hand she gestured around the room. "I just spent 18 years in domestic servitude, and when I finally get up the nerve to escape, what happens? Different place, different man, same shit."

"Whoa up there, my dear Barbara. I never asked you to get into my domestic garbagio. That's not what I want from you. . . ." And he twirled an imaginary mustache, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively. "Heh, heh, m'dear, what I want from you we can talk about later, but in the meantime, you don't have to lift so much as a pinky around this establishment."

"Untrue!" she cried. "For the past four nights, you've

been all involved with PaperPal Pens, right? And you've been coming back late. And you know what you've done for the past four nights? You've sat down, eased off your shoes and said, 'What's to eat?' Without even saying hello or, or, or *anything*!"

"Oh really? Well come right over here and I'll give you a little *anything* . . . or maybe a lot, if you play your cards right."

"That's right. Sex will solve everything!"

"Joke, Barbara, joke!" There was an edge to his voice that she recognized. The little woman wasn't playing by his rules and he didn't like it; she knew *that* tone.

"Joke? Oh really? Tell me another."

He gave an exasperated sigh; but then, Jake-like, changed mood completely and fell onto his knees, his hands clasped pleadingly in front of him. "Barbara, my darling, I beg of you, don't cook, don't clean, don't mess around in my things! I love you madly, I wish only for your happiness. Shall we eat out every night? Just tell me. Shall we dance until dawn? Willingly. Shall we go to Plato's Retreat and learn something new? But say the word!"

"Don't condescend to me, Jake! I don't have to be pampered, just respected!"

One eyebrow shot up. "Did I *really* hear you say that? You want to know if I'll *respect* you in the morning? Didn't that sort of thing go out in the fifties?"

She looked down at him, uncertain whether to laugh and end this whole scene the way all scenes with him were ended—as a joke without anything being solved or settled —or to indulge her anger. She picked up a dish from the carefully set table, carefully set by herself, she reminded herself, and hefted it in her hand. "I'm so *sick*," she said, "of doing all the demeaning little nitty, little shitty, little tasks in this world. You know what would make me happy? Really happy? I'll show you—" And on a sudden impulse, she hurled the plate across the room, watching half satisfied, half horrified as it smashed against the wall and broke into smithereens. "Oh dear!" she gasped.

"Don't let it worry you," Jake said. "It's okay. Dishes

are a dime a dozen . . . well, maybe more at Bloomie's but it's okay."

"*You* think it's okay. But that's not my style, Jake. I'm not in the habit of losing my temper and letting things fly."

"Well," he said reasonably, "maybe it's time you learned how. Holding it in ain't good for you, so they say."

She laughed shakily, unable to quite meet his eyes. "I must admit, there was something oddly satisfying about it."

"Hell, baby, if that's what it takes to satisfy you, break 'em all!"

"Oh, Jake!"

"No, I mean it! I told you I love you and here's the proof." He sprang up and trotted over to the miniscule kitchen cabinet and flung the doors open. She knew even without looking that it was crammed with white china dishes, service for eight. "Help yourself," he said. "Be my guest. Whatever feels best to you . . . A platter? . . . How about a soup tureen? . . . two saucers, a sauce boat, a nice fat bowl?" And he began to pull them out as he spoke.

"Goddammit, Jake, you think you're so smart—!" She snatched a dish from his outstretched hand and flung it, turning immediately for another. Her heart started to pound wildly, as if she had run up several flights of stairs. She grabbed a bowl and sent it soaring across the room to shatter against the wall. "That's for all the shit I took!" CRASH! Now a dinner plate: "And all the trips downtown!" CRASH! "The goddam paint remover!" CRASH! "Grammy's quilt!" CRASH! "For *Barbie doll*!" crash! One after the other, she reached, she pulled her arm back, she threw, they smashed and they splintered, the shards flying in white showers through the air. What a delicious sensation! To lose her temper, to yell and scream, to make a mess! To make a mess!

She was smiling; she could feel it curling her mouth, feel the excited laughter bubbling up in her throat. "And, this, you bastard—" But when she reached out her hand, Jake did not push a china object into it. Instead, she felt the warmth of his hand. In an odd voice, he said, "All gone, darlin'. No more dishes! Just me."

She turned to look at him and knew immediately that he was terribly aroused. She was aroused herself, breathing heavily, all her pulses hammering. In a moment, they were on the floor, tearing avidly at each other's clothes, clutching avidly at each other's flesh. Her very blood felt as if it were boiling. She wanted only to be smothered, taken, covered, pounded at, filled, fulfilled. She wanted only to be satisfied and satiated. She wanted only that her particular itch be scratched. She wanted what she wanted and she wanted it now, hard, deep, quick, quicker, quicker. She cried and she moaned, flinging her body up to meet his, pulling him closer into her. She felt faint with frenzy, wild with lust. And then she screamed wordlessly, clutching at his shoulders, and gave herself over to wave after wave of sensation.

They lay, eyes closed, breathless, limp and exhausted. She found she did not want to talk, or move, or think. She just wanted to lie there on the floor and *be*. She felt totally drained. A small smile tugged at her lips. That Jake. Who else in this world would hand you his best dishes, one by one, and invite you to break them until you felt all better? How good he was to her, in every possible way.

On New Year's Eve, when she had slammed the door of that house on Orange Street and put her past behind her, she had absolutely no idea where she was going. Momentum carried her far enough to run to Clark Street and hail a cab. But then, when the cabby said, "Where to, lady?" in a bored voice, she suddenly realized she didn't know. And then, Jake's address popped out of her mouth. And as soon as she said it, she knew it was exactly right. That's precisely where she wanted to go right now: to Jake's.

Of course, when she was standing outside the entrance to his brownstone in the freezing cold, it occurred to her that it was New Year's Eve and that he was probably out. Or, oh my God, worse than that, had a lady up there in his apartment. For several chilled and lonely moments, she stood on the stoop hesitant, her finger poised over the bell that said HI THERE! IT'S ME, JAKE MILLER. And then, oh hell, she pushed it. If he wasn't there, he wasn't

there. She'd find a hotel. She'd do *something* . . . And then his voice came, distant and tinny, out of the air: "Who is it?"

When she said, "Barbara, Jake, I'm—" the canned voice over the intercom fairly shrieked: "Don't go away! Even if you're a beautiful dream, don't go away!" And he buzzed her up.

There he was, framed in his doorway, resplendent in white tie and tails complete right down to the ebony walking stick. She turned from the landing and just stared at him and he began to sing, "I'm puttin' on my top hat, puttin' on my white tails . . ." moving smoothly into speech: "So come on in, beauteous Barbara, and tell Uncle Jake the whole sad story."

"I must look awful," she muttered, and he smiled, drawing her in and closing the door behind them. "Never," he said. "Look awful? You? Impossible."

The sweetness of his voice, the total acceptance of her sudden appearance into his life, was overwhelming. She threw her arms around his neck and, as he held her close, let herself go. She wept and wept and wept, for how long she had no idea. Once started, the tears simply would not stop. He patted her and held her the whole time, murmuring into her ear, kissing her tears away on the side of her face, wiping her eyes with his hand.

Finally, she was able to speak. Hiccuping a little, she said, "I feel so alone, Jake, make love to me." And he did.

Now, lying on the floor, holding him in her arms, she realized that tonight was the end of it. It had been a sweet six weeks, he was a wonderful guy, and what would she ever have done without him? He had kept her from feeling totally bereft and cut off from the rest of humanity. He had been the nice warm hand in the darkness, helping her as she stumbled along, trying to find her way to an unknown destination.

I've been hysterical all these past weeks, she thought. I've been talking and walking as if I were a normal woman, but I've really been in the depths of hysteria. And now I'm

coming out. She thought of all the cozy little domestic habits they had formed in just this short time. Yes, it would be so easy, so pleasant, just to slip right into a relationship with him and never have to worry about being alone or unloved or unwanted or lonely.

"Jake?"

"Mmmm. . . ."

"Jake, I have to make a choice."

"Mmmm . . . sure, baby . . ." He stiffened, he loosened his hold on her, and he sat up. "Choice," he said, "grim word, choice. I hope it's between Chinese take-out or pizza."

She shook her head. "I thought not," he said, sadly.

Now Barbara sat up, hugging herself against the chill air, and looked right into his eyes, "Jake, listen . . ."

He looked away. "Oh, how I hate those words . . . They've never boded any good for anybody."

"Jake, I'm so fond of you . . ." He groaned dramatically. "But I *am*, Jake. But, listen. I've got to get away on my own. You saw how resentful I was tonight. Well, it would only get worse, I know it. That's what I hated most about my marriage. I mean, it wasn't a bad marriage, it was better than most, I think. Certainly we loved each other; I think we probably still do . . . oh stop, don't look like that, it has nothing to do with how I feel about you. But it was expected of all of us to meet and marry and live happily ever after, and for women, the way to achieve that was to give up control of our own lives, our own bodies, our own destinies. I realize now what a mistake that was. You know why? Because, in my whole life, I've never made choices. It was Mark's game we played, with Mark's rules. Hey, look, that's how marriage was supposed to be, and that's how I thought I was supposed to be. But my Lord, Jake, I've never taken a single risk, I've never done a single thing that I decided for myself. I have to at least find out if I know *how* . . . if I *can*." She paused, breathless.

"If you're going to tell me next that you have to 'find yourself,' I am going to wring your lovely neck."

"I know it's amusing to you. I know a lot of women are saying the same things, and it probably sounds all stale and

adolescent. But I must grow up . . . I must choose my way. I've always been the typical this, that, and the other, always falling into the roles I was told to play. And I always slid into each role so easily, so mindlessly. I don't want to do that anymore. I don't need to find myself. I need to know myself. My God, Jake, it'd be nice to find out what the hell I *like*, even!"

"Well, whatever it is, apparently it's not spelled J-A-K-E."

"But I do, I do. I like you and I love you and I treasure you. You have been so good for me, you have no idea."

"I have an idea," Jake said tonelessly. He unfolded his long legs and pushed himself to his feet. "I'm also hungry." He gave her a long look. "Chinese take-out or pizza?"

"Oh, Jake!"

"Look, Barbara, if you gotta go it alone, you gotta go it alone. Okay. That's cool. I get the message. But first, let's have a little moo shoo pork, a little egg roll, a little won ton soup."

"Oh, Jake, is *everything* a joke?"

He grinned at her. "Everything except fried rice and fortune cookies." He pulled on his pants, stretched, and yawned.

"You're sure you understand?"

"I understand, I understand. Hey, I love you, I want to marry you, but that doesn't mean I need you to live with me!"

"Oh, Jake!" Why did she feel so let down? Barbara wondered. But she thought she knew. She had a sneaking suspicion that she had rather hoped he would plead with her to stay, that he would proclaim his love and at least act a *little* bit as if he would miss her. But wasn't this exactly what she was trying to get away from? Shame on her. "Stop fooling around now. I mean it. I really have to leave."

"Okay. I get it. Maybe I even agree. Every nice girl should be on her own for a while. Get to know what wonderful is: eating a can of tuna straight out of the can by yourself, waiting hours for the phone to ring, trying to laugh at something funny on television when no one's next to you . . . the sky's the limit!"

Barbara took a deep breath. He was as elusive as a silvery fish . . . just kept slipping away whenever you wanted to talk about something. She frowned at him. Maybe it was just as well that she was leaving. And then it struck her. Leaving! For where, pray tell? She was actually no farther along in a new life plan than she had been six weeks ago on New Year's Eve when the cabby said, "Where to, lady?" and she had not a clue.

"I'm leaving, I'm leaving," she said, trying hard to imitate Jake's bantering tone. "The question is, you see, where am I going *to*?"

Jake gave her a sidewise grin. "The way I see it, Barbara baby," he drawled, "you have three choices. One: the YWCA of Greater New York, there's a nice one on Lexington Avenue. Two: my Aunt Sophie's boarding house in Queens right near the airport . . ." Barbara looked at him, her heart sinking. It was a joke to him, but where oh where was she going to go?

"Or . . ." He paused dramatically. "Three: you *could* consider taking the apartment upstairs from Carl, who just got a job in Brussels. No, no, no undying gratitude, and I don't require your body in exchange for the keys. Maybe you won't even like it. The kitchen is *very* small. Don't hit, Barbara, it's not polite. Don't hug so tight, I can't breathe and I need to breathe to tell you that it's tiny, it doesn't have a view and it doesn't have a working fireplace. But it's only two-hundred fifty dollars a month and it just so happens that Carl's leaving day after tomorrow. You want it?"

"Oh Jake!"

He cast his eyes heavenward. "She wants it. She wants it. And maybe, if I'm very good, the next thing she'll want will be *me*!"

28 The Party's Over

Jake leaned on the sink with both hands and eyed himself, nose to nose with his reflection. He groaned. The wrong face. He'd thought that every time he saw himself in a mirror since he went into puberty. Rudolph Valentino with the face of Howdy Doody, was that fair, was that nice? He looked very pale and wan and gray around the edges this morning. Not enough sleep yesterday, helping Barbara to move her pitiful few belongings upstairs.

It hurt. It hurt that she wasn't here anymore. And she hadn't even let him near her last night. No farewell fuck, no love, no nothin' . . . He began to hum. "No love, no nothin', until my baby comes home . . ." Well, Barbara wasn't coming home to him, not anymore. He took out his razor, inserted a fresh blade, looked at himself again and laughed out loud. *The rejected suitor eyes himself in mirror, flourishing razor, while blues plays in background.* "When your heart's on fire, you must realize, smoke gets in your eyes . . ." Or, on the other hand, "It was just one of those things . . . so good-bye dear, and farewell . . ." Or how about, "I'll never smile again, till I smile at you . . ." Oh shit. He dabbed at his chin with a tissue. Cut yourself again, you jerk, didn't Daddy tell you not to sing in the shower or when shaving? But who ever listened to Daddy?

He moved his jaw from side to side. Clean. Not a whisker. Maybe he should grow a beard. How would he look

with a beard? He squinted at himself, but the only thing that came to mind was a Smith brother. Maybe he *shouldn't* grow a beard. Maybe a mustache. Oh shut up, Jake, go take a shower.

The water was good and hot and the pressure was fine, for a change. He let it beat on his back, stretching under it. Actually, it was very pleasant to be alone, to throw the wet towel on the floor, to wander into the kitchen naked, not have to make brilliant conversation. Yes, it was okay. Still . . . "It had to be you . . . wonderful you . . . I wandered around and finally found the somebody who . . ." He sang at the top of his lungs. To hell with her, to hell with them all! "Life is just a bowl of cherries . . . Don't take it serious . . ."

Toweling himself off, he thought, Well she's still upstairs, isn't she? It isn't as if I'll never get laid again. And there was that blond giantess from Wisconsin or somewhere, Natalie's new secretary . . . she looked promising, she had given him a look that spoke volumes . . . oh hell, just the thought of all that work, all that chat and all those drinks and all that eating and all that charm just to put another notch in his jock strap as it were. . . . "No, no, they can't take that away from me . . ." Wrong song. He began to hum, "It's the wrong time, in the wrong place, though your face is lovely it's the wrong face . . ." It's not *whose* face? he asked himself and thought of Natalie.

Natalie. Jesus. Had he screwed that one up completely? "Face it," he said aloud and made a face at himself in the mirror. "You miss that broad." He missed her. He didn't like it, but he missed her. She could be mean as a snake, but dull? Never! And as much as he adored Barbara, much as he longed after her, shall we finally face it? She didn't ring his chimes. "There, I've said it again," he warbled at his reflection and then turned away.

Yup, Nat was a much better lay than beautiful Barbara. Barbara was willing and happy. But Nattie, now, she was lusty, eager, and hot as a two-dollar pistol. And woops, there it went. Down boy!

Remember Martha J Jones? Oh yup, it remembered Martha J Jones. He regarded his erect penis as if it were

somehow separate from him. And sometimes it acted as if it were. That Martha J! He walked out of the steamy bathroom, shivering slightly, looking for his jockey shorts. One night with that woman was all his middle-aged heart could stand, if he was going to make it to 47. Hoo! What energy! You had to be young to carry on like *that* every night of the week. "I want a Sunday kind of love . . . a love to last past Saturday night . . ." Come on, admit, it isn't just sex with Nattie. Look at all the shit she's taken from you . . . if you lined it all up, it would circumnavigate the equator. And that thought just made him laugh.

He dressed quickly and decided he would grab some breakfast on his way to breakfast in Nat's office instead of trying to cook something. To hell with cooking, to hell with domesticity. To hell with romance; he was too fucking old to start up with that stuff. He slammed and locked his door behind him and gave a glance up the stairwell. Barbara, baby, bye-bye. You got things to do and I've got fences to mend. "Good-bye dear, and amen, here's hoping we meet now and then, It was great fun, but it was just one of those things."

29 Be It Ever So Humble...

The room was really tiny, no more than perhaps 10 feet by 14; but it had been furnished so charmingly that one forgot its dimensions. One wall had been hung with a collection of hand-woven baskets of all shapes and sizes, the high-riser was cozy with an antique quilt, a giant fern flourished in the window, and a bottle of sherry with three glasses sat on an Indian brass tray table.

"You have a knack," Martha J drawled, thrusting her long elegant legs out in front of her and kicking off her gold leather shoes. "No doubt about it, you have a knack. This is just like a page from *House and Garden*."

Barbara threw her head back and laughed. "That's me, all right," she said. "A page from a magazine! I have this feeling that my life always follows some periodical or another . . . *Seventeen*, and then *McCall's* and *Ladies' Home Journal* . . . And now, just as I figured I'd graduated to *Working Woman*, I discover I'm still into *House and Garden*."

"No offense intended. I *love* this room. And in fact, Barbara, when Calvin and I do our thing in front of the minister and move into our condo, I'd love it if you'd come and tell me what to do about decorating."

"Don't put me on, Martha J. With your sense of style—!"

"That's why she got promoted," Natalie laughed, refill-

ing her glass from the Perrier bottle. "Because of her modest demeanor and self-effacing attitude."

Martha J hooted and then quickly became serious. "You know, Nat, my modesty and self-effacing attitude have gone over like a lead balloon with Jeff-er-ey. I think something is going to have to be done."

"You're right, of course. I should have thought of that. But so much was happening all at once . . . What do you think of giving him Marian's group?"

"He could handle it," Martha J said, "if that's what you mean. But . . . what about Marian?"

"Don't worry about Marian," Natalie said dryly. "Marian is about to leave us."

"Oh, I didn't know that," Barbara said.

A wry laugh. "Neither does Marian."

There was a brief strained silence and then a nervous laugh from Barbara. And then Martha J said, "Well, I guess that takes care of *that*!"

Throwing her hands out dramatically, Natalie smiled. "The loneliness of the oval office, ladies, and that means making the tough decisions without whining."

Barbara filled in the next silence by refilling glasses. Natalie was drinking spritzers tonight, just a splash of wine and the rest Perrier; and so was she.

"But listen," Natalie said, "I have tougher decisions. For instance. No sooner did I ascend the throne when in comes the sainted Debbie and guess what the sainted Debbie wants to do?"

Martha J heaved an exaggerated sigh. "Oh shit," she said. "Debbie wants to write copy."

"You got it. The best secretary in the entire world, and I used to pray daily that she would never, never get the idea in her head that she wanted to be a copywriter and now I know . . . God isn't a woman, because no woman would deprive me of my wonderful efficient secretary!"

"You're going to let her?" Barbara asked.

"Well, of course. I have to let her try. I have to give her a chance. Otherwise, she'll never get the hell out of Bensonhurst and away from that professional virgin, Mary-Claire." Then she laughed. "Watch the magic, ladies. Since

Mary-Claire will be handling a lot of my stuff as well as Peter's from now on, she'll soon be the sainted Mary-Claire —And maybe if Debbie becomes a copywriter, her beloved Jeffrey will look upon her with favor. She could do worse, for a first time."

Martha J's eyebrows shot up. "Oh, really?"

And Natalie grinned companionably at her. "Oh really. Yes indeed."

"Well, if I didn't have Calvin, I could go for that bodyguard of Peter's," Martha J said. She sipped at her wine. "Where'd you find Raymond anyway, Nat?"

"Tony the bartender, where else? I tell you, you don't know who your friends are until you need a favor. Tony apparently has unlimited cousins. Whatever you need, he's got a cousin who can make it for you, get it for you, fix it for you, paint it for you, or steal it for you. He is terrific! And Raymond! He's a dream. Just right for Peter. He plays a terrific game of gin, and his conversation isn't limited to who's playing first base for the Yankees this year."

Barbara raised her hand, like a kid in school. "Please, ma'am, could I ask a question? What's the matter with Peter Marcus anyway?"

"Peter's fine," Natalie said quickly. "He has a drinking problem . . . which we're clearing up. He's too young to handle the stress of running that big agency all by himself. He's at a very good place out west right now. And after they dry him out, he'll hang out there for a while and ride horses and camp and get therapy. My feeling is that he's alone too much. That's why I hired Raymond, really, as a companion. Peter fussed at first but, really, he loves it. He loves company. He's happy as the proverbial clam."

"What'll he do . . . in the agency, I mean?"

"Oh, he kicked himself upstairs. He's still president, he's still the Big Boss. But now he'll concentrate on the fun part—going after clients and charming the shit out of them."

"So what else is going to happen?" Martha J asked lazily, but there was a bright gleam in her dark hooded eyes. "Any other major changes?"

"Nothing much," Natalie said with a grin. "Although I may get Gloria a blue dress . . ." They all laughed at this, and she leaned forward, saying, "She really *is* plastic. She's not real. Do you know, the day Peter decided on my promotion . . . I mean, nobody knew about it yet, *nobody* . . . Well, I stepped into reception that day, waiting for the elevator, and Gloria looked up and said, "So, Ms. Simon, you're in charge now, right?"

"She didn't!" Barbara shrieked with delight. "She did!"

"That's right. Nobody knew. But *Gloria* knew. Gloria knows everything. So be careful with your lovers, ladies. Take separate elevators . . ."

The doorbell rang, making them all jump. Still laughing, Barbara flung the door open. "Jake!" they all cried in unison.

"Upon my word," he said, "it's the West Side chapter of the M & M cabal in secret meeting. Planning and plotting, plotting and planning. But never mind all that, just give me a drink. Here I am, sleek and barbered, trim and well tailored . . . the very picture of urbanity and sophistication and yet and yet . . . would you believe, I feel like hell." He came into the room. "But I have a feeling I'm about to feel a lot better."

"Forget it, Massa Jake," said Martha J. "We wimmins is havin' wimmins' talk. So you gonna have to find yo'self somewhere else to settle down in."

"Okay, okay, I can take a hint." He laughed. "And anyway, I don't think my heart could take all three of you at once!"

"Huh!" snorted Martha J, "I don't think you could take even one of us at once!" And she laughed evilly.

"Well, if you wanna take me on, any or all of you, I'm downstairs in Apartment seven, formerly the library when this building was the British ambassador's home. I'm leaving, but I want you all to know I'm terribly hurt."

The three women laughed.

After he left, Natalie looked around the room and said, "British ambassador?"

"Oh Lord," Barbara said. "The landlady, Mrs. Helfgott, manages to work that into every single conversation, in-

cluding good morning. Mrs. Helfgott cannot get over the fact that at the turn of the century, this house was—well, never mind, here I go. *My* apartment was 'formerly the nursery of the children of the British ambassador.' "

"Well, that explains only one window. Who cared about kids at the turn of the century?" Natalie looked around again. "You were so lucky to find a place so quickly."

"Well, I was right downstairs, with Jake . . ." Here, she paused, hesitating. "That is, I—"

"It's all right," Natalie said dryly. "We're all grownups here. We understand . . ."

"Oh no, oh no," Barbara insisted. "It's not like that. We're just friends . . ." She and Natalie looked at each other for a minute, and then both began to laugh. "That is, I—"

"That is, you— I get it."

"No, really. I don't quite understand it myself. The night I walked out on Mark—and the kids, of course—I was hysterical. I was so furious and angry and upset I couldn't even think straight. The cabby said, 'Where to, lady?' and I found myself giving Jake's address. I don't know . . . it just seemed the right thing to do, no, let me rephrase that, it seemed the *only* thing to do."

"You were lucky he was home," remarked Martha J. "Everyone I know gets out and boogies on New Year's Eve."

"Are you kidding? I was so upset, I didn't even think of it till I was standing there, ringing his bell. Then it struck me. Here it is, ten P.M. on New Year's Eve. He's either out or he's got some lady upstairs . . . So there *I* was, nothing with me but forty-seven bucks in cash, my checkbook—Lord only knows why I thought of taking my checkbook, but not my makeup—and the clothes on my back. Talk about planning ahead! No woman, I'm sure, ever left home so ill prepared.

"When he buzzed me in, I couldn't believe my good fortune. And he was so nice, oh Lord, nobody could have been nicer. He never asked me a single question until the next morning—oh dear—!" She flushed and slid a quick look sideways at Natalie.

Natalie gave a great sigh. "Come *on*, Barbara. Let's all 'fess up, okay? And then we can quit being all blushy and embarrassed all over the place. We realize you stayed with Jake for a few weeks . . . six, to be exact, but who's counting? . . ." And she laughed briefly. "And so let's also admit that Jake has been, at one time or another or both, my *swain*, and go on from there." She gave Barbara a long, level look.

Now Martha J began to laugh. "Well, ladies," she said, "since we're all comin' clean—"

Both Barbara and Natalie turned to her, mouths open identically. It was Natalie who spoke first: "You—and *Jake*?"

Martha J grinned with delight. "Incredible, ain't it? But, you know, I believe in facing facts and I said to myself, Martha J, before you plight your troth and all that stuff to Calvin, there are one or two things you gotta do. And Jake was one of them."

There was a moment of silence. And then Natalie said, "So?"

"So?"

"Come on there, Martha J, you can't just give the title and not tell the story. When and how? We know why."

"Remember when you asked me to take your place at the Ad Club Dinner? That's right . . . then's when. And that's how, too."

Natalie shook her head, smiling broadly. "And to think while I was sitting in the basement of the church listening to twelve children play the piano, you were having a wonderful time. I think?"

Martha J cogitated shortly, staring up at the ceiling. "The thing about Jake," she said with care, "is that you don't have to be all emotionally involved. He doesn't really care about the essential you, just so long as he can make you feel good for the amount of time he's making love to you . . ."

"Ugh!" Barbara said. "I couldn't go to bed with a man if I thought he didn't know who I was . . ."

"That's not exactly what I meant. The thing is, Jake is very sensual. He's . . . he's, well, the only way to put it, I

think, is that he's sexually talented. He really cares a lot that you enjoy it and that you feel good and that everyone is happy, see. But my feeling is that after it's over, he may not really care about . . . oh, a *relationship*."

Stung, Barbara responded: "He asked me to marry him! He *wanted* me to marry him! He wanted me to stay with him, at least!"

"So why didn't you?" Natalie said.

Barbara paused. "I don't know . . . he's an awful lot of fun . . . and, yes, he's a good lover. But I want . . . I don't know, *space*, room to maneuver. I want to be able to look around and choose what I want to do and who I want to see and when and how and why and . . . and . . . everything. I don't want to have to consider anyone else's needs —oh Lord, that sounds so selfish and angry!"

"Hey, baby," said Martha J, sitting forward, her body tensed, "Listen here. This is the Martha J Jones Theory of Life: if it feels good, go with it, and if it don't . . . *don't*. If you need to be selfish and mad for a while, hell, what's wrong with it?"

"You're right, you're right. I've just extricated myself from a very close relationship—eighteen years' worth—and I don't want more of the same. Not for a long, long time." She turned to face Natalie. "I feel a little funny, discussing Jake, Natalie, because I know that he and you—"

"Were lovers, okay. But come *on*, Barbara, I don't own him . . . I have to admit, I miss him. More than I thought I would. Hell of a nerve, right? I'm married and what's more, I'm going to stay married. Even so . . . for years and years, Jake was the best friend I had in the world. Oh what the hell . . ."

"He loves you too, Natalie," said Martha J. "His conversation is full of you. He loves you, all right . . . in his own way."

"He has a crush on Barbara." Her cheeks were pink.

"Oh, I think he *did*," Barbara admitted. "But he's over that now." They exchanged a long look, the three women, and then all three smiled. And then, they all began to laugh helplessly.

"All of us!" Natalie finally gasped. "All three of us! He's

been to bed with all three of us! How many times does that happen in a person's life? It's a goddam golden opportunity!" She gave the other two women a twinkly look. "He fed me either Chinese or deli."

Grinning, Martha J said, "We had room service bring up caviar and champagne."

Natalie whistled in appreciation. "Not bad for spur of the moment. Of course . . . you never got to sample a chocolate-covered apricot . . ." Martha J rolled her eyes and laughed. "And how about you, Barbara? What kind of food did he figure would turn you on?"

Barbara blushed. "We ate an awful lot of Hunan-style Chinese food . . . very spicy!" And once again, they were speechless with laughter.

"Well," Martha J said, at last. "I guess I'm gonna have to go through life wondering what delicacy I missed . . . But then, I'm gonna have the biggest chocolate-covered delicacy of them all . . . Mr. Calvin H. Spencer!"

Natalie leaned toward Martha and said seriously: "Martha J, listen. Here I am, not too happily married and here's Barbara, who was supposedly happily married. So what makes you opt for *marriage*, of all the damn things?"

"I just spent a couple of years getting that man all trained just exactly the way I want him. He's kind, he's thoughtful, he's aware that I'm intelligent . . . and, what's more important, when I walk by him, any time of the day or night, it stands right up and salutes! Yep, I'm going to marry him. No other woman is going to benefit from my hard work. I figure I can handle it. No choosing this or that for old Martha J Jones, unh unh. I'm not going to choose, I'm going to take it *all*. Of course, I will forego the motherhood part—unless or until Calvin forces the issue. I feel I've *done* the motherhood bit."

Natalie said, "You're smart, Martha. You can't do everything. That's what's happening to women today. They think they're obligated to be superwoman: mom, wife, friend, support, career woman, colleague, good guy—the works. It can't be done!"

After a pause, Barbara said slowly, "I wonder if that's what really precipitated my move . . ."

"Well, you keep talking about choices. You just made one."

"Yes, I decided to leave. But you don't leave motherhood. I'm still Scott and Jennifer's mother! I still love them and yet here I am, having deserted them. Oh yes, don't shake your heads, ladies, I've abandoned my children, my children's mother has abandoned them." And her eyes filled.

"Wait a minute, Barbara," Natalie said sharply. "You wouldn't hear a man carry on like that. But they're fathers, aren't they?"

Stubbornly: "It's different."

"*Why*? What the hell makes it different? It's just as much abandonment when a father does it."

"No it isn't, Nat, and you know it. The mother is the primary care-giver."

Natalie laughed shortly. "Jerry's a better mother than I am."

"Oh Natalie! That's evading the issue. My kids are big, sure, but I know they still need me. My Lord, when *I* wake up in the middle of the night with a bellyache, *my* first thought is always, 'Mother, where's my mother?' I'm sure I should be there."

"So go on back," Martha J said.

"I've almost done that, a dozen times. I miss Mark, I'll admit it. I miss my children, too, and it hurts like crazy when they're so hostile to me. They're so angry . . . listen, *they* think I abandoned them. But I can't go back unless Mark makes some basic changes in his attitudes . . . I just can't! I can't live anymore with a man who is always putting me down. And frankly, ladies, I can't see Mark ever changing. In fact, one day he said it himself: he said, 'You can't expect men to give up their prerogatives without a fight . . . why should they?' He said, 'When you're in charge, you don't just hand it over.' "

"Well," Natalie said, "I still say it's all cultural and unfair. Your children should be just as angry if Daddy leaves."

Barbara opened her mouth, but before she had a chance to answer, the doorbell gave its strident ring. She pushed

herself up, making a wry face, and flung the door open, saying, "Jake! We *told* you that we're—oh dear! oh *dear*! Mark!"

"Hello, Barbara. Oh, sorry." His handsome face, carefully and closely shaved, flushed; and he mumbled a general greeting to the room at large.

"What are you doing here?" Barbara asked.

"What does it look like? We need to talk. You've had plenty of time to come to your senses—"

Swiftly, she turned. "Excuse us, ladies. Help yourself to some nibbles, I'll be back in a minute." And gesturing with her head, she led him out into the narrow and dimly lit hallway, closing the door softly behind them and hanging on to the knob behind her, as if for support.

Mark frowned. "You needn't be so dramatic, Barbara. You've made your point. You've had your little fling. I can see . . . it's just like the sorority house all over again, giggling with your little girl friends and cooking over a hot plate. But now it's time to come home."

"No. And those 'little girl friends' are two highly paid, highly intelligent *women*. And this is my new apartment. *This* . . . is my home."

"Get serious, Barbara. Let's stop playing games. You don't walk out on a good marriage just like that." He snapped his fingers. They were both speaking in low, hushed tones.

"A good marriage? Maybe for you it was a good marriage. I've read, Mark, that any marriage can only accommodate one and a half people and guess what? I got tired of being the half."

He snorted in disgust. "Oh, for—Will you come off it? What kind of woman's liberation shit is *that*?"

Barbara sighed loudly. "You see? We have nothing to say to each other. Your 'good marriage' is your wife's prison."

"Barbara, I don't know what you're talking about! We were always so happy! We had the same goals, we liked the same things, we shared friends and good times, and we were always good in bed together. What do you mean, prison? I don't get it!" On his face was a look of genuine

perplexity and pain. Barbara put a hand on his arm for a minute, as if in comfort, and then removed it. She looked sad.

"Actually, Mark, we only had the same goals and liked the same things as long as they were *your* goals and *your* things . . . and . . . oh dear, I'm afraid it was the same with our sex life. All *your* fantasies, none of mine . . . oh yes, Mark, that's how it was. I'm not saying it was bad, sweetie, it *wasn't*. I don't know how to make you understand this, but none of it was *bad* or *rotten*. It's just that none of it was ever . . . my idea."

"Me . . . my . . . mine. Those seem to be your favorite words lately. Pretty selfish, don't you think?"

Barbara dragged in a deep, heavy breath of air and straightened her shoulders. Keeping her voice as light as she could, she said: "Well, Mark, I figure it this way: eighteen or nineteen years of *selfless*, eighteen or nineteen years of *selfish*. Seems fair, doesn't it?"

"You're sick, Barbara, you know that? But you'll soon tire of this . . . playing house and playing at work, playing bachelor girl . . . you'll see. You're used to the best. You won't be able to stand living in this . . . ticky-tacky dump."

Barbara stared at him for a minute, clenching her fists tightly. "I'm right," she said at last. "We have absolutely nothing to say to each other anymore." And she pushed the door open, backed herself in, and slammed it shut, locking it ostentatiously.

30 Welcome Home

China Chili was only half full at six in the evening, which meant that their drinks were served superfast. Now they'd barely gotten beyond the first awkward stage of making polite conversation and already Barbara had finished her vodka gimlet. She was ready for another—oh boy, was she ever ready for another!—but she hesitated saying so to Mark. He'd be sure to comment.

"I don't know why you insisted on coming here, Barbara." Mark was frowning, just twiddling with his martini glass and not really drinking. "I have a refrigerator full of food . . . all your favorites. We could have been nice and cozy in front of a fire at home—"

She shook her head. "Not home, Mark. Not home to me, anymore."

She saw that glaze come over his eyes . . . the blank look that told her he was not going to hear her say that—or anything else he didn't want to hear, for that matter. Well, she was through playing "let's pretend" with him. She drew in a breath and hardened her heart. He was still the best-looking man she had ever seen; and it was difficult at moments to maintain her cool—especially when he touched her. His casual hand on her back, steering her into the restaurant a few minutes ago, had been enough to send her heart fluttering in that old familiar way. It had been a long time, she reminded herself, months since he'd so much as held her hand. It hadn't been easy, giving up their good sex. She had found herself, many nights, dreaming about him, waking up and wanting him.

But not now. The reality of him sulking at her from

across the table was not a turn-on. She made up her mind, silently signaled the waiter for another drink—to hell with what Mark thought!—and said brightly, ignoring his deepening frown: "You called me, Mark. It's your nickel. You said you wanted to talk. Good. Let's talk."

"It's the children . . ." He picked up his chopsticks and made designs in the white tablecloth.

"Yes . . . the children. You're right. That's the part we have to work out with care."

He looked up, startled. "They need you," he said.

"Yes, I know that. That's why I'm spending so much time with them. I know they don't like the idea of our separation . . ."

"I don't either."

Barbara sipped nervously at her drink. This was not where she wanted the conversation to go. "You said on the phone, let's get together and work this thing out. Okay, let's get to some specifics. . . ."

"Specifically," Mark said with meaning, "your children miss you and need you. It's time you came back."

She sighed. "Mark. Listen. I'm not coming back. I wish you could get that through your head."

"That's nonsense. Maybe you're enjoying your so-called freedom right now but sooner or later, Barbara . . ."

"Mark, I didn't come all the way to the Heights tonight to have the same conversation we've had over and over again." She gulped down the rest of her drink, and looked around for the waiter.

"Don't you think you've had enough to drink?"

Now she flared. "None of your goddam business!"

"Well our kids are my business. And if you can stay sober long enough for us to have a reasonable conversation . . ."

"Mark!"

". . . for us to have a reasonable conversation about the reality of the situation and not your romantic notions of liberated womanhood—"

Barbara clenched her fists. In a tight voice, she said, "Mark, listen to me. If you don't quit this, I'm going to get up and walk out of here. I'm not here to have you criticize

my life. And the reality of the situation is that I'm not coming back—ever."

Mark stared at her across the table. My wife, he told himself. That's my wife. His feelings about her hadn't changed a bit in the three months since she pulled her little disappearing act; and he was sure it was the same for her. How did you set aside all those good years, all the shared years? Jesus Christ, they'd had two children together; they'd slept together in the same bed. He had never so much as looked at another woman . . . well, maybe looked a time or two, but he'd never fooled around. She was his one and only, all those years. Jesus, he *loved* her. How could she sit there, saying all that garbage? He knew the answer and it was named Natalie Simon. Goddam it, she was imitating that ballbuster. He understood that. Now they were called role models; when he was a kid, they were called idols . . . a teacher or a supervisor you thought was terrific so you copied him.

So it wasn't that he didn't understand the situation. But enough was enough! It had been three months now; time for her to stop fooling around. Why couldn't she see how juvenile she was being?

"You really don't mean that, Barbara." He reached over to touch her hand. He wanted so badly to touch her; it was like a hunger. And she pulled away! Why did she do that?

"I mean it," she said, pressing her lips together. Oh damn, he'd have to watch every word now, in case he said some damn thing that the women's movement told them was unacceptable. It was a nuisance, it really was. All he wanted was for her to come back where she belonged and get life back on its track again. He'd let her keep working, if that made her happy. Hell, he'd even grit his teeth and be friendly to Nat Simon—although he'd much rather keep his distance from that one. She was a dangerous woman.

"Barbara," he said, leaning forward. How was he going to convince her that home was where she belonged? "I still love you." This time he held his hand out across the table; and this time, he saw with a surge of triumph that her eyes softened and her lips visibly relaxed and parted. He knew that look. A moment later she reached out and took his

hand in hers, and he thought, Good, she's coming back to me. Some things never change.

Poor Mark, Barbara thought. He doesn't get it. The marriage is really over and he can't face it at all. Poor baby. And yet, there was no denying that he still had the power to turn her on. There was a definite charge when their hands touched. It was all she could do not to lean over and put her hand deep in his hair. That rush of blood had turned her face warm and it made her a little sad to realize that, not too long ago, feeling that, she would have thought, How lucky I am to have the man I love and desire. But now it was all changed. Since she had left that night, there had been other men. Jake, of course. Jake, first and foremost. He was a wonderful lover; but the most important thing was that she had learned that a man can be a wonderful lover, even when you are not in love with him. And since Jake, there had been others. Several others.

She gazed across the table at Mark's chiseled features and gave an inward, secret sigh. He would die if he knew how many men she'd been to bed with . . . and how often she had enjoyed it. There had been a couple of bummers: one guy was gross, and another had had a funny smell to him, and then there was the night she'd had a bit too much to drink and took that good-looking client from Chicago to bed with her. She'd been so embarrassed the next morning, thinking about it, because she really didn't like him that much. But it had been super sex. And what would Mark make of *that*, she wondered. He'd probably find it disgusting. Well, it wasn't her proudest moment, but she had learned, finally, that it wasn't so horrible having casual sex; it didn't destroy your capacity to feel real emotion, it didn't degrade you, or harden you, or make you an automatic whore. It didn't do any of those things men kept insisting upon. On the whole, she had to admit to herself, sex after separation had been terrific . . . and Mark could just like it or lump it.

Of course, she'd never tell him, she thought, gazing at him and smiling. The marriage might be over—and now, more than ever, she realized that it probably was—but there was absolutely no sense in hurting him unnecessarily.

Not after all the years—the good years—and, they had had two children together. The father of her children . . . yes, that was worth something, even after the magic was gone. She felt a flood of warmth. His face was so . . . familiar, so dear. The shape of his hand, the feel of his fingers even, were known to her. It was, well, comfortable to be with him, no need to smile quite so brightly, no need to flatter or flirt. . . .

"Will you come home with me, Barbie doll? I want to make love to you," he was saying in that urgent voice she remembered so well. And it seemed right, somehow, at this moment, in this place in her life. They hadn't been to bed together since the night she left, and in the beginning she had dreamed of him a lot—even a few times during the weeks she'd stayed with Jake. Lately she was beginning to wonder . . . would it be the same, after all her new experience? Obviously she was still ambivalent about him. A few minutes ago she'd been damn angry at him and ready to walk out without even a glance back. And now she was thinking how dear and familiar he seemed to her. And even though she knew she didn't really love him anymore, she had to recognize the rising excitement within her. She still wanted him. Well, that was one thing she'd learned during the past months: that it wasn't necessary to be madly in love in order to enjoy sex. So let him learn it, too!

"Now?" she smiled. "We haven't even had our dinner."

His eyes glittered. "Now. Forget dinner." And without taking his gaze from her, he stood and snapped his fingers. "Waiter!" he called. "The check, please." But his eyes were saying something quite, quite different.

She was delicious. Oh God, she was delicious. He'd been laid a few times since she'd left, but with her it was pure honey, pure honey! She was moaning and writhing under him, moving her body in ways that only he knew, whispering words that were only for him, touching him in those special ways she knew he loved. He hadn't felt this way in a long time; it was as if an electric current were coursing through his body. When he first entered her, it had been such a charge that he'd had to stop dead, hold very still for

fear of coming too fast. But now she was urging him on, clutching his buttocks, digging in with her nails. If he timed it just right, they would get it off together. He'd show her there was no running away from what she needed . . . no running away from him . . . no running . . . no, no . . . and then they exploded together and it was delicious, delicious. . . .

He turned over on his side, his arms firmly around her and lay quietly, smiling to himself. Of course she needed him. Of course she missed him. How could there be anyone else for her? It hadn't taken him long to discover there was no one else for him, not really.

Nuzzling into the curve where throat became shoulder, he murmured, "How would you like to redo this room?"

There was a funny moment of utter silence. He could feel her whole body stiffen. Then, she said, "What?"

"You've always said you wanted a new look in here . . . well, now I'm willing—"

To his surprise, she struggled out of his embrace and sat up, flinging her long hair back; and when he reached out to grab her hair—he had always loved her hair—she jerked back from him, making a face. "What do you mean, 'redo this room'? What are you talking about? Do you actually think—? Yes, I can see that you actually think that just because we screwed . . ." And she broke off, beginning to laugh. "It *is* this room you're talking about!"

What the hell was so amusing? "Of course it's this room."

"Why 'of course,' Mark?" There was an edge to her voice he didn't like at all.

"Well, after that little session . . . it's obvious."

She began to laugh, helplessly waving her hands at him in apology. When she felt she could speak—and by this time, he was rigid with annoyance, feeling like a goddam fool—she said, "Oh Mark, if I redecorated for every guy I've laid in the past couple of months, I'd be busier than Sister Parrish. . . ."

He had to sit up; he could feel the blood drain out of his face, could feel the pulse in his temples hammering. Clammy sweat broke out on the back of his neck and in

his palms. She couldn't mean—! No, not Barbara. She'd never so much as looked at another man all the years they were married. He knew it!

"You didn't say that!" he said in a strangled voice.

"Oh Mark, don't be naive."

Fury swept over him. "That woman! I knew it! She's turned you into a . . . a . . . a slut!"

"Mark!"

"And if you think I'm going to permit my children to have anything to do with you . . . ! I'm not so naive, Barbara, you needn't worry about that. I believe you, all right. And if you ever want to seè Jen and Scott again, you'll have to take me to court!"

Again, she began that infuriating cackle; and he flung himself out of the bed, looking around frantically for his clothes. If she didn't stop soon, he was going to belt her. There was nothing funny about not seeing your children, especially if you were their mother.

She just sat there, cross-legged, in the middle of the bed, grinning at him . . . *grinning at him!* And what what she saying?

". . . might as well stop threatening me with the children, Mark. Haven't they told you anything? My God, they've seen me on the average of three times a week ever since I left; we've been spending our Sundays together just about all day. . . . You mean, they *haven't* told you? Oh, dear, they *are* nits. But I mean, it's been all decided. Scott wants to stay at St. Ann's with his friends and Jen hates Manhattan. . . . I mean, I told them I could start looking for a larger apartment . . . but they want to stay in the Heights. It's understood that they can come stay with me whenever they want . . . they'll just have to bring sleeping bags. . . . Don't look so dumbfounded, Mark, they are big kids, you know—young adults, perfectly able to know what they need, or what they want. . . ."

He *was* dumbfounded. The kids hadn't said a word . . . although, wait a minute, yes, they had, but they'd never told him they were talking to her so seriously, making life decisions without him! Wait till he got his hands on that Scott—!

"I'm sorry, Mark, but that's how it is. You see, you can't blackmail me with the kids anymore . . . or with sex either."

Now she got out of the bed, putting her clothes on. He watched her, feeling very remote, noting the full thighs, the heavy breasts, the curve of her flank as she bent over. It seemed to him that she had always had a certain . . . delicacy about her. Now, it was gone. He looked at her and she looked different, coarsened . . . used goods, that's what she looked like.

"Put a little weight on, haven't you, Barb?"

Barbara looked up at him, startled. Had he really said that? There he was, grim as death, backed into a corner, arms folded tightly across his chest, looking her over as if appraising her market value—the bastard! And then to hit below the belt like that—. As soon as she realized what she had just thought, she laughed inwardly at her own pun. He just *had* to put her down, didn't he? Had to let her know she was fat. "Actually," she said, surprised at how cool her voice sounded, "I'm seven pounds lighter than when I left."

And, she added silently, if I needed any further proof that I did the right thing by leaving you, you've just given it to me. The poor slob . . . he really did want her back; he wanted his old life back, intact, the same as it had been before New Year's Eve.

Well, too bad, Mark, it's not going to happen—anyway, not with this lady. Because this isn't the same old lady. She's gone out into the world and changed.

Pulling her slacks on she was struck suddenly with the realization that she really had moved on. She had been making her own decisions about her own life—and that of her kids, come to think of it—without wondering first what Mark might do or want or think about it . . . without, actually, wondering what *anyone* might do or want or think.

Hey! she marveled. I've finally done it! She buttoned up her shirt, looked around for her shoes . . . kicking them off in a buzz of passion seemed like something that had happened a million years ago . . . and then looked once more at Mark glowering there in the corner. He hadn't moved an

inch. Unmovable . . . that would be engraved on his tombstone.

She had broken away! She had really broken away! She was finally on her own!

31 Hail and Farewell!

Everyone was there—everyone Natalie wanted there, that is. A subdued and very tan Peter, back from Wyoming, sat in one corner nursing a glass of Perrier and chatting quietly with Millard. Raymond unobtrusively stood close by, trying to blend in with the wall.

Natalie regarded Peter. The change in him was fantastic. He was so affable; whatever she said was okay with him, and that was just fine with her. All those nervous little drug-induced tics and eccentricities were gone and that was a relief. Only one thing bothered her: he had taken to watching her every move, keeping track of her all the time. It was like having a two-year-old who hung onto your legs everytime you tried to leave the room. He kept dropping into her office, calling her on the phone, sending her memos.

Nevertheless, it was nice to have him back . . . especially in time for this party, a farewell to Marian Rutledge. That's what this gathering was for, even though the guest of honor had long since gone and it was only 5:30. Marian had not been happy to leave M & M, but tough noogies. She just didn't fit anymore. She was too old and too old-fashioned. And, if the truth be told, she had never been very creative anyway. She was really the last of the old guard and, now that she was gone, things should perk up quite a bit. Natalie had a bright young image in mind for M & M, and she was damn well going to use Peter where

he'd really do some good, for a change. He was terribly good with quick ideas and skilled at selling them. He was certainly no administrator of people . . . or of money for that matter.

It had to be the epitome of dumb: screwing around with the withholding tax. My God, any 10-year-old child could have told him: don't mess with the IRS. But of course, the shape he was in then he couldn't have cared less what anyone said about anything, floating out there in space somewhere. Well, never mind. That mess had been all cleaned up, at enormous cost to the agency and at enormous cost to her nerves as well. Six meetings with terribly serious and grim tax men in those drab dreary-green government offices were not her favorite way to spend Mondays and Wednesdays. Anyway, it was done now. And with her in charge, the agency could really get moving again. Hell, Marian should have been fired long ago; she'd been dead wood for ages. But no. Peter had never really fired anyone; he just got his jollies from threatening.

Natalie strolled over to the sideboard, where her new secretary had set up the champagne and canapés. Creative Cohorts had found her in record time—Sally Lindstrom fresh from Minnesota, six feet tall, with a three-foot-long flaxen braid and a plump milkmaid face. But the brain behind that empty blue-eyed look! It was wonderful. She had, in the first hour, set up a whole new filing system where retrieval was logically simple. And then she had started to type at unbelievable speed. Here I go again, Natalie had thought. Praying to the gods of Madison Avenue that this one won't want to do anything but be my secretary forever and ever amen. Fat chance!

Sally was bright enough to hang around this party and make herself useful. At this moment, she was unobtrusively acting as waitress. As soon as Natalie got to the sideboard, she handed her a full glass of champagne without a word.

"Oh good!" called Peter. "Now that Natalie has a drink, I want to make a toast." Natalie stared at him. In fact, he *was* constantly keeping track of her every little move, and it was beginning to get on her nerves. But she smiled at him and waited patiently.

He stood up. Really, he looked as well as she'd ever seen him: trim and taut and pulled together. He held his glass aloft and cleared his throat until everyone in the room had turned total attention to him. "To our new creative director —I know there are those who call her Head of all Creation—" He paused for the expected laugh, which he got. ". . . a woman of peerless talent and endless charm . . . a woman whose value to me I cannot begin to express . . . who has, in so many ways on so many days, been a true helpmate . . . who, ladies and gentlemen, is the sole reason we are all able to stand here this day . . ." Natalie began to frown a little. At first, it wasn't unpleasant to have him make a toast to her. But it was becoming uncomfortable. She looked around; sure enough, the kiddies were all exchanging glances. Dammit, he *looked* so good, it was hard to remember that, inside, he was still pretty mushy.

"Peter, Peter," she interrupted with a light laugh. "Brevity is the soul of a good commercial, you know that."

"Okay, okay, then let me just say—because I must say it—that no one will ever know what a wonderful human being this woman is. Ladies and gentlemen, she saved my life. I give you—"

"And I, for one, will take her."

Jake! Natalie turned, astonished, to look at him. It had been a good long time since she had looked Jake straight in the eye. In fact, ever since she discovered he and Barbara had spent those weeks playing house, she had been doing her best to avoid him. She felt betrayed. All those years, down the rat hole for the sake of a tall blond fantasy! She didn't want to deal with her disappointment; she didn't want to hear alibis from him; she wanted only to concentrate on business, and to hell with him.

And now, here he was, twinkling and flirting. As she stared at him, he gave her a long, level look and then dropped a wink, lifting his glass to her as Peter finished the toast. Everyone drank, including Jake, but his eyes stayed on hers. The message was as clear to her as if he had shouted it across the room: "Nat, let's try again." She sipped from her drink, hiding the smile that sprang to her lips, thinking, We'll see, we'll see. Was there any man in this world better for her than that forever-boyish witty redhead. He knew

her so well, in so many ways, over so many years and through so many experiences. At their age, how could they possibly hope to replace each other. Oh hell, why was she fooling herself? Of course they'd get back together. But she wasn't going to make it easy for him, oh no! And then from across the room, he grinned at her. That devil, he had always been able to read her mind!

She glanced over at Jeff, talking to Tommy Thoms. Funny, she hadn't noticed before how like brothers they looked. Recently, Jeff had put on 10 or 15 pounds, all of it in his belly . . . she heard somewhere, maybe from Debbie, that he'd stopped playing squash and had taken up with his dozens of blond ladies again . . . and today, in tweeds, with vest and rep tie, he suddenly looked older, plump, soft. A Tommy Thoms in the making. She had overheard them a bit earlier, discussing taking "the client to din-din at the club." She could hardly believe it—this rapid metamorphosis from handsome young Princeton kid to overstuffed and pompous group head. She just knew that soon he'd be getting married and commuting from Connecticut. As for Tommy, he couldn't be happier. A soulmate, at last!

Speaking of soul and mate, there was a wonderful combination of both, looming in the doorway of the board room. Martha J's Calvin, who had put a diamond the size of a small headlamp onto her third finger left hand, had just arrived, looking exactly like someone's dream of Really Tall, Really Dark, and Really Handsome. He was an imposing figure of a man, at least six and a half feet from his Gucci loafers to the top of his close-cropped, neat head—and, if she wasn't mistaken, almost six feet across the shoulders, too. And Martha said he was terribly smart; he had certainly made a lot of money in the market. Okay. No wonder Martha J thought she had to try combining a career with marriage. Calvin apparently was dead set on getting married and that being the case, who could blame her for not wanting to give him up?

Quickly, she moved over to where Martha was earnestly talking with Debbie and murmured: "Your Main Man is here."

Martha wasted no time in greeting him.

"Wow!" Debbie said. "Those two in a clinch are a show-stopper. He's something, isn't he?" And Natalie patted her on the shoulder and said, "We'll try to find you one of those in white." She gazed over at the couple, thinking, You'd better not turn out to be a male chauvinist pig in disguise, Calvin dear, or you and I will tangle for sure. Martha J, having been given her head at last, was turning into a regular whiz of a group head. She had two writers under her at the moment: Debbie—on trial, but Martha had already told Natalie that Debbie was "lookin' good"—and an attractive woman in her 40s recently out of the steno pool. She was called Eve Soloway, and she'd come back to work after her separation last summer and was proving to be solid, clever, and funny as a crutch.

Millard came over and said, "My dear, did you ever! I knew Calvin was large, but *really*—isn't that a bit excessive?"

"I think he's adorable," Natalie said.

Millard grinned at her. "So, in fact, do I. Better than Marian . . . though I must admit I find I'm liking her a lot better since she left." They laughed, and he called over, "Ms. Jones, before you leave for the day, could you just take one little bitty look at the processor—"

"Luckily, I got my rhinestone plated screwdriver right here in my handbag. Come on, Cal honey, let's go into the kitchen and see what we can fix up!"

As they left, the dark giant rumbled, "Excuse us, please. We may be gone for quite a while."

Everyone was in fine shape, Natalie thought with a glow of pleasure. She sneaked another look over at Jake and felt a lift in her heart to meet his eyes once again. He was just standing there, staring at her! And she was loving it! She felt flustered and fluttery, and to cover up, she began to talk to Mary-Claire—poor Mary-Claire, as she'd begun to think of her.

As soon as Martha J had taken on Debbie, Mary-Claire had come to Natalie's office, quite literally wringing her hands. Natalie invited her in, and at her request, closed the door. Before she even sat down, Mary-Claire had started to whine. "Debbie thinks she's such a hot-shot now, just be-

cause she's getting a chance to be a copywriter, not everybody wants to do that, it's boring, some of us are happy to be executive secretaries."

As soon as she paused to take a breath, Natalie said, "I don't think I understand, Mary-Claire. What's the trouble?"

"I don't know what makes her think she's too good for me now."

"Oh, I'm sure that's not—"

"Oh, yes it is. Natalie! She's even moving to the City! We've been best friends since third grade at Our Lady of Lourdes and now—! She's got new friends and new clothes, and I don't count at all!"

Natalie remembered making vague noises about people changing and growing, but the girl was inconsolable. To Natalie's horror, she began to blubber. And then she became angry and abusive. "It's just like my father always told me . . . you can't trust anybody. And it's true, it's true. I know that when she's living in Manhattan, she won't go to church anymore, and we always go away together for two weeks to Virginia Beach and she's going to Club Med . . . *Club Med*! . . . that's a hotbed of sin!"

It was very difficult, Natalie discovered, for her to talk to Mary-Claire without bursting into laughter. Sin! Were there still people in New York who spoke seriously of sin? Obviously there were, and they were named Mary-Claire. Poor Debbie, no wonder she was eagerly escaping from her friend's clutches at last.

She had given Mary-Claire an extra job to do and the name of her own beloved haircutter, Terry, and hoped that would hold her together for another month or so. But something about Mary-Claire bothered her; she might have to replace her with somebody more stable and more mature who could handle Peter.

Now she patted Mary-Claire on the shoulder, just nodded and made polite noises—rolling her eyes at Barbara, who watched the byplay with interest, sipping at her champagne.

"Well," Barbara said, as Natalie came over to her. "Things sure are looking good around here since you took over."

"My thought exactly." And she laughed. "Although, Mary-Claire . . ."

"I know. She's a piteous creature, isn't she? All virginity and indignity. But I think she's solid, really, the kind who becomes wedded to her job."

"Oh, well, good. Then I won't have to let her go. Because I have spent this past month plugging up holes and patching things together, and I'd like to get going . . ."

Barbara smiled. "Now that we have Eden's Dream, no reason not to just start chugging along . . ."

"Yes, and have you noticed, Peter's into vitamins and health food, as if a guru came in the night and gave him The Word engraved on two tablets. It couldn't be more perfect and let me tell you, Adam Pierce just eats it up with a spoon. Here's the president of the agency using the product—with a vengeance!"

"Adam Pierce . . ." Barbara ruminated. "He's a case."

"What do you mean?" Natalie said sharply.

"Oh nothing terrible. But he spent all day in the kitchen with me on Tuesday; I had on a terrific sweater, and guess what he did?"

"Oh Lord, I'm not sure I really want to know."

Barbara made a little face. "Nothing. Nothing but taste seventeen different ways of serving soybean grits. Can you believe?"

"What a shame," Natalie agreed. "He's so good-looking."

"He's also the Tommy Thoms of his company. Eats, sleeps, thinks, and for all I know dreams health food. Oh well . . . I said I wanted to be on my own—!" And she made her way toward the bar.

Natalie watched her thoughtfully. Was Barbara sorry she had left her husband? He was still insisting that she really wanted to come home and should "stop this pretense at liberation." Was Barbara perhaps beginning to weaken? She certainly talked a lot about her children and seemed to be drinking a great deal more lately than she used to.

Natalie put down her own untouched, now-flat champagne and decided to keep an eye on what was doing with Barbara. For herself, it was funny, she hadn't missed booze nearly as much as she'd thought she would. But now that

she was really in charge around here . . . well, she had everything she could possibly want. She didn't need to drink.

And then there was Jake at her side. Be cool, she told herself, feeling the pulse flutter in her throat.

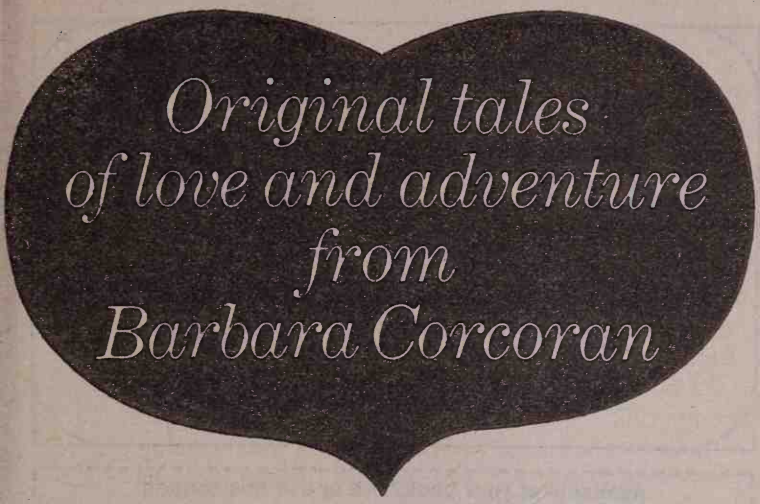
"Gee Maw," he said, "I remember back when you were just one of us kiddies. And looka you: the Boss Lady. My, my, time does fly, don't it?" There was no rancor at all in his tone, and she knew that only Jake of all the men in the world could be genuinely pleased to have her as his boss.

"Yes, time does fly," she agreed dryly, "when you're having fun."

Jake put an arm around her shoulder and, bringing his lips very close to her ear, murmured: "Yeah. Let's have fun. Let's blow this joint."

Why, in spite of herself, did those words fill her eyes with tears and her heart with joy?

"Which door," she said, her voice shaking a little, "and how fast?"



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